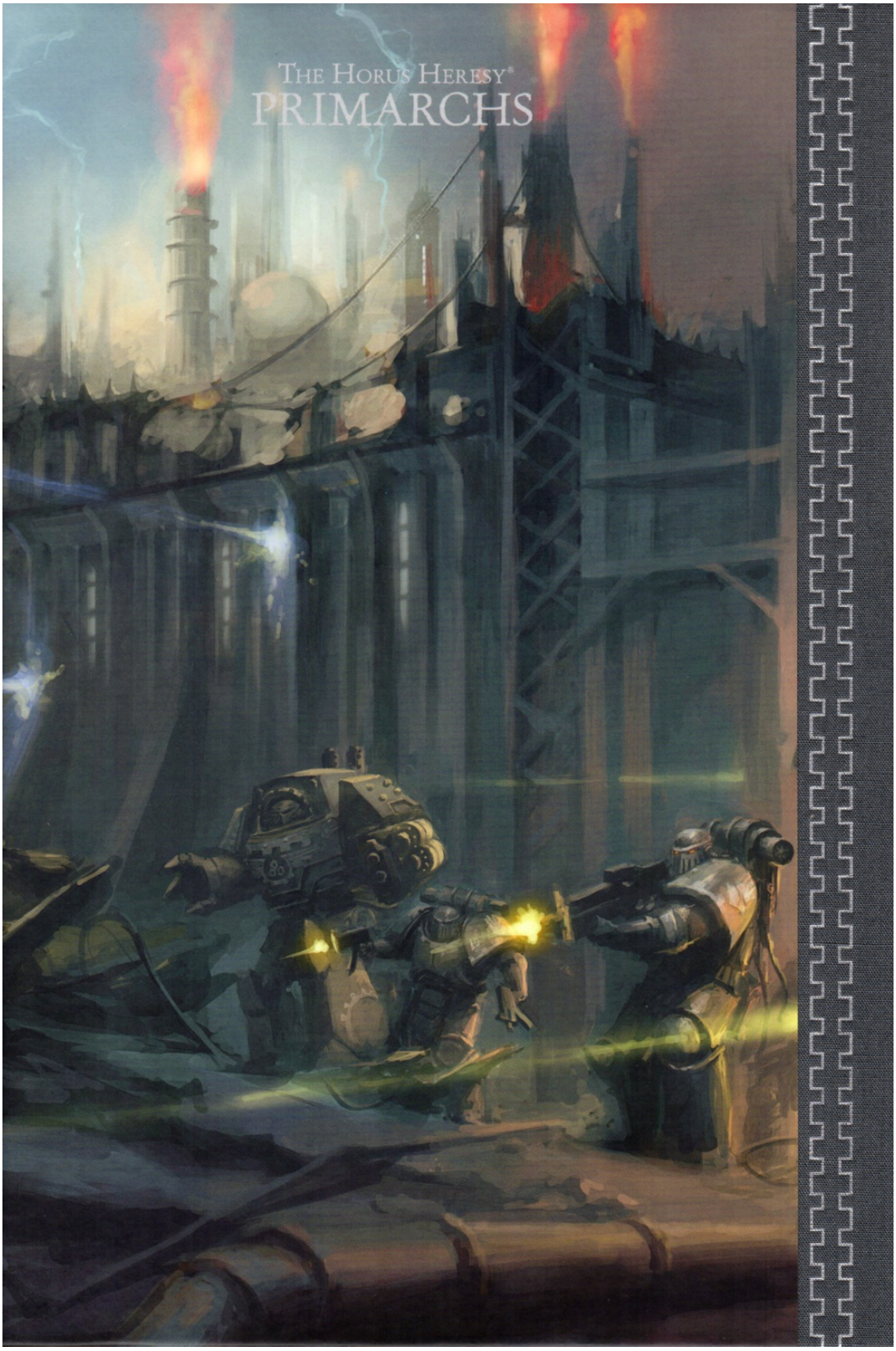
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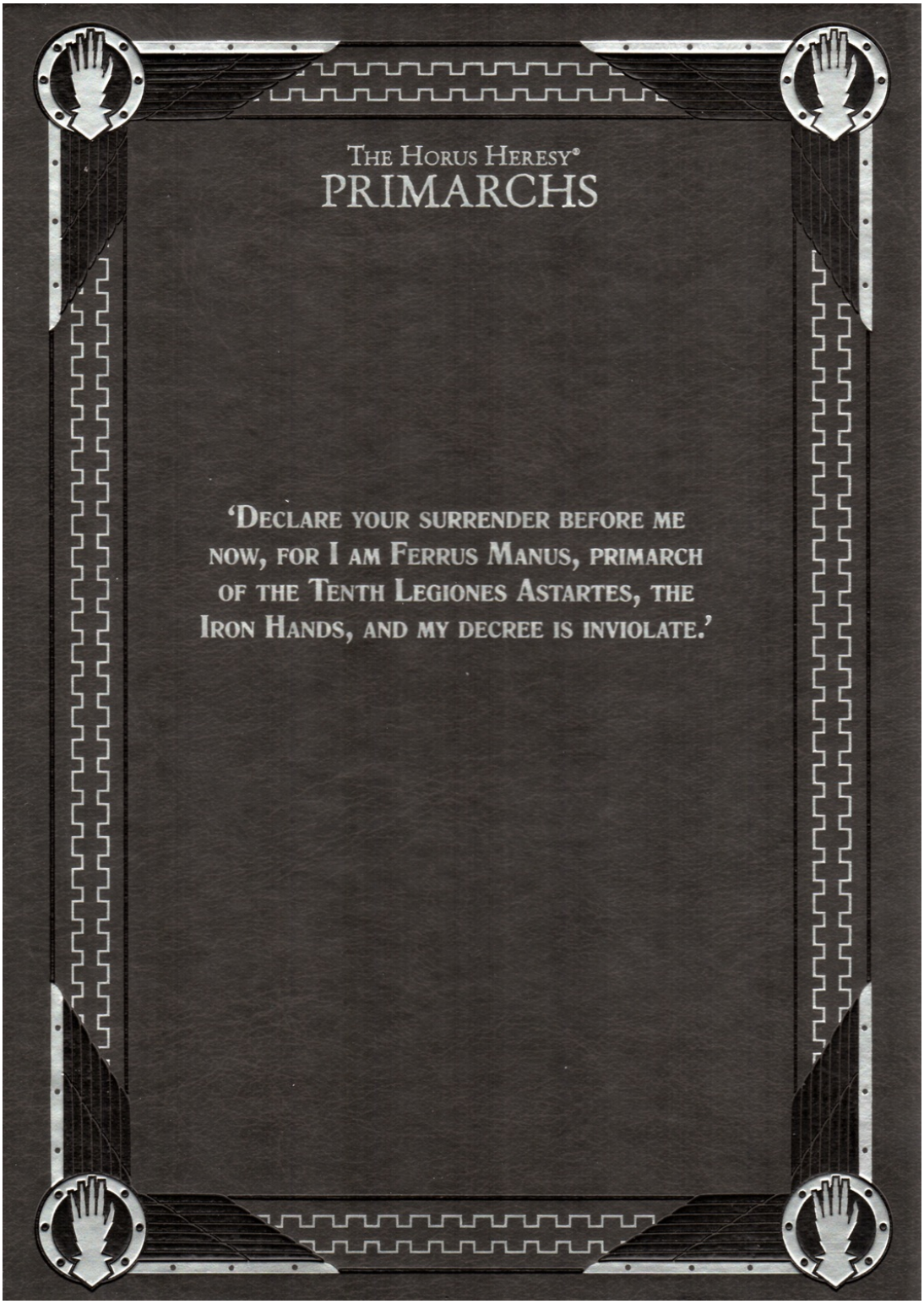
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'DECLARE YOUR SURRENDER BEFORE ME NOW, FOR I AM FERRUS MANUS, PRIMARCH OF THE TENTH LEGIONES ASTARTES, THE IRON HANDS, AND MY DECREE IS INVIOLATE.'

THE HORUS HERESY®

The Primarchs

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Taken from us too soon, who knows what might have been.

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THE HORUS HERESY

It is a time of legend.

Mighty heroes battle for the right to rule the galaxy. The vast armies of the Emperor of Mankind conquer the stars in a Great Crusade – the myriad alien races are to be smashed by his elite warriors and wiped from the face of history.

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The seeds of heresy have already been sown, and the start of the greatest war in the history of mankind is but a few years away...

'Ulan Cicerus was a passionate rhetorician, and he described the Gardinaal to me in a rhetorician's terms - they were "big fish in a shrinking pond".

The Chapter Master's ability to turn a phrase, coupled to an apparent inability to recognise that few amongst his audience had the cultural reference frame for an ecological metaphor, never failed to endear him to the regiments of the doomed 413th.

'It is a continuing failing of mortals to be unsettled by perfection.

'What little I thence learned of the Gardinaal would have been familiar to any child of Sol, but none of us could have been prepared for the degradation practised on those eleven worlds in the name of efficiency, or necessity. "Why would humans choose to live like this?" Cicerus once demanded of us, as if we, without the blinkers of Ultramarian descent, could better answer.

'The truth, as one of Terran descent would say, is that such men are seldom given choices.

'We were not.

'Our orders came from the offices of the Emperor himself, beloved by all. The Imperium desired the industrial power of the Gardinaal for the Great Crusade. The Gardinaal desired effective sovereignty, and had the military muscle to ensure that the 413th gave fair hearing to their demands. Nobody wanted a war.

'But then, nobody gave us a choice.'

- The Remembrances of Akurduana, Vol. CCLXVII,
The Fall of the Lords of Gardinaal

ONE

Amadeus DuCaine thumped shoulder-first into the rockcrete wall.

He dropped to one knee, turned his back, calmly ejected the spent magazine from his bolter and snapped home another of the specially tagged sickle-mags. As he did so he noticed the las-burn on his vambrace, cursed aloud, and took a moment to buff it out using the wrist of the opposite gauntlet. He'd been taught to go into battle looking as he'd want the Apothecaries to find him. Today was no different.

The thick harness of his Mk I Thunder Armour was so polished a black that it shone under the inconstant light and creeping ice like volcanic glass, covered in company and campaign citations, most of which the Legion no longer officially recognised. Of them all, his pride was the Seal of the Eye of Vigilance, etched in platinum into the cheek guard of his tall helm. He had earned it in the latter years of the Seraphina offensive, campaigning alongside Lord Horus after the X Legion's annihilation of the ork forces on Rust. Good years. A curtain of chainmail, alternating rings of black iron and silver, hung from his shoulder guards. A collar of iron spikes traced the rear of his gorget ring and rose behind the back of his head. He carried a Clan Sorrgol banner as a cloak. It was heavy velvet, reinforced with a metal weave, weighted with onyx, black spinel and star sapphire, and glazed with ice. The clan device was picked out in silver.

With a series of heavy thumps, his command squad joined him in cover.

Techmarine Rab Tannen. Apothecary Aled Glassius. Half a dozen age-raw, hoarfrosted, brutally decorated veterans almost as hard-bitten as their Lord Commander. Storm Walkers all and proud of it. The boy, Caphen, was last.

The lacquered purple of the youngster's armour was scuffed and bullet-grazed, the palatine aquila that stood proud of his chest plastron burnished with coppery hygroscopic ice. Breathless sounds emerged from his helm augmitter as he crashed into the wall at the far end of the line.

'They coming?' DuCaine asked, and checked his vambrace for damage under the passing alchemical light of an aerial flare.

Caphen nodded. 'They're coming.'

The boy had been attached to the command squad strictly as an observer, but the old hands all looked at him as they would a stressed bulkhead, something that might give at any second and void the entire proverbial section.

'The lad's one of us now,' said DuCaine, raising his voice to contend with the shrieking fire of the Tarantula batteries dug in on the other side of the wall. 'That's the last I want to say on it.'

The lad nodded his thanks. Even if he did flinch at being called 'lad', '*boy*,' or any variation thereof.

Satisfied, DuCaine looked up, as if he could discern the progress of the battle from the flicker trace of fire and dying flares. Vesta was a sunless moonlet, adrift in the void, cast off by its parent system at some point or other over the last five billion years under circumstances that didn't interest him, and dark as hell. It was cold enough to flash-kill a primarch. Until a few days ago, it hadn't had a name. That was why the enemy had chosen it.

Who would miss an orphan moon that no Imperial cartographer had yet bothered to stick a number to?

He turned away to see that Gaius Caphen had worked his way up the line towards him.

'I am uncertain about this tactic, Lord Commander.'

DuCaine laughed. An inbred respect for the proper chain of command and an innate disapproval of so single-minded an approach to warfare were clearly tying the boy's head in knots.

'This tactic is a classic. Did I not tell you of the time that Lord Horus assigned his own First Captain as my equerry after Rust, to see it first-hand?'

'I think you may have,' muttered Tannen.

The Techmarine had been amongst the last cohort to learn his craft in the Ural forges. He was among the last to have retained a Terran sense of humour. DuCaine threw him an ironic 'thank you' wave.

'It won't work against the Emperor's Children,' said Caphen.

That single statement soured the mood more than all the artillery of the III

Legion ever could.

DuCaine had been trying not to think about it.

But if the lad had any qualms about facing his own brothers in battle, then he wasn't showing it. DuCaine was impressed. Even if it had been Fulgrim himself who had given the boy his orders. The rest of the command squad picked up on his resolve; their attitudes of suspicion noticeably relaxed.

'The warlord clans of old Albia have been perfecting this way of war on each other for hundreds of years,' DuCaine explained. 'The trick of it is to deploy only the *exact* amount of strength you need to draw your enemy into a straight fight.'

'And in ensuring the men so deployed have the nerve to stand before the storm,' said Glassius, in characteristically portentous language. The Apothecary liked to project an air of gravitas onto the suckling neophytes he had to call brother. 'And in increasing numbers, sir.'

DuCaine nodded in Agreement. He'd become aware of the custom that had developed amongst the mortal auxilia of the 52nd Expedition, of scribing their own condolence letters prior to deployment. DuCaine heartily approved.

The clans of old Albia had observed similar traditions.

'This phase is called Raising the Storm. It's a template we followed on the Central Afrik and in the Panpacific Campaigns.'

Caphen's look, even through the frosted amethyst of his helmet lenses was one that DuCaine had come to recognise all too writ over the last century and a half. It wondered just how hard Unification could have been. How it could possibly have taken the Master of Mankind and his twenty Legions so long to achieve.

'You heard of Rust?'

'I think he may have,' said Tannen.

'It won't work.' Caphen repealed. 'The Third Legion don't fight in that way.'

'I know tire boy we're lighting here well, and he's not nearly as good as he thinks he is. In my experience a battle can be controlled right up to the point where it begins. After that I don't care if you're not technobarbarian from the Afrik, an ork, or aye, even Legiones Astartes, you do what everyone does in a battle.'

Caphen shook his head, but did not protest further.

DuCaine shrugged, turned back to the wall, slung his bolter strap over his shoulder, then set his boot against the frozen rockerete surface as if about to pull himself up over the top.

'We just have to sweeten the lure a little bit.'

Moses Trurakk pulled the control stick hard to the left, intending to jink but

instead dragging the hyper-responsive Xiphon Interceptor into a hard break to port lie cursed in consonant-heavy Medusan as snap shots scotched his canopy and clipped the roll of his starboard wing. G-force crushed him into his flight harness as the unfamiliar machine dumped forward momentum into the turn. Pushing his engineered biology to the limits of its tolerance, he levered himself up from his harness and craned forward, catching sight of the heavily armed wedge of black as the enemy aircraft overshot.

'Didn't see that coming,' he muttered sarcastically.

Conjuring mental formularics of encouragement and common purpose, he directed them towards the Xiphon's rebellious spirit via the interface shunt plugged into his upper spine He dragged his augmented left hand from the dashboard to grapple the stick two-handed, the interceptor's wing flaps juddering violently as it began to level out. A groan forced its way through his teeth. It felt like he was lifting the aircraft by hand. 'You're sensitive enough when you want to be.' Just as he felt the wobble along his midline that told him he was about to pitch into another roll in the opposite direction, he pushed his hand through a hard gauntlet of gees to open up the throttle. At the same time his boot eased off the rudder pedal and the interceptor slammed him back into his harness and shot into a climb, scissoring over and under the enemy strike fighter as each sought to get in behind the other.

Unable to break the stalemate after half a dozen turns, the more powerful Primaris-Lightning broke off with a massive burn of thrust.

Moses had no option but to let it go.

The Xiphon was a ludicrously high-performance machine. It boasted phenomenal corner speeds, touch-responsiveness, and was as agile in atmosphere as it was in the void. But for all its aeronautical capabilities it hadn't a scratch on a Primaris-Lightning for raw manoeuvring power.

He took advantage of the temporary lull to silence a string of alarms demanding his attention, and to correct a potentially serious fuel imbalance in his starboard nacelle.

The Xiphon was too complicated for its own good. It was lightweight and underpowered, and the design compromises inherent in a propulsion system that could operate in a range of atmosphere types, even one as inhospitable as Vesta's, or in a vacuum made her a nuisance of micromanagement in a fight.

He didn't even like the colour.

'You need a lighter touch on the ailerons,' said Ortan Vertanus. Moses scanned the coppery belts of cloud that strangled his aircraft, but saw no sign of his wing-brother. *'And not so belligerent with the stick. She wants to fly, brother. Let her.'*

'I have a solid grounding in all Imperial aeronautical.'

'But do you love her, brother?'

'My feelings are inconsequential. And my aircraft is agendered.'

'I know that you talk to her when you're alone in there.'

'I assure you I do not.'

Light laughter crackled through the augmitter pad in Moses' control board.

'I believe it was the Shakespire that said - my brother doth protest too much. Combat is more than numbers and angles. It is a joust.'

A shudder passed through Moses' canopy armourglass as Vertanus' purple Xiphon roared overhead. Its wings were anhedral with a downward-cranked tip, like a Felgarrthi vulture tucking in its pinions to swoop on rotting meat. Its two stripped-down engines frothed the thick clouds with white, its pilot making expert use of Vesta's gravity to fire the aircraft across Moses' nose and into an overshoot.

'Show off,' Moses muttered.

'Are you even trying, Iron Hand?' voxed Paliolinus, wing commander. *'I was told that you had more confirmed kills than any combat pilot in Clan Vurgaan.'*

'You were informed correctly,' Moses replied tersely. The joint exercises between the III and X Legions had been Lord Manus' proposal, to challenge ingrained approaches and provoke competitive spirit across both sides. Legion honour mattered. But clan honour mattered more, and personal honour more again. He would rely on any man of the Iron Tenth to say the same. 'Give me time,' he said. And an aircraft that does not handle like a parchment aeroplane, he wished to add but did not. A gifted artificer did not impugn his implements.

'I apologise if I sound harsh,' said Paliolinus, sensing his defensiveness. *'I do not know if I could perform to my fullest in your place.'*

'You have not seen my fullest. But you will. I will not fail my primarch.'

'Well said, brother.'

A string of icons, symbols and unit-level organisational motifs flowed from the wing-commander's flight cogitator through to the marker recognition algorithms of Moses' ventral auspex. He scowled at the implication that he might need a reminder.

'The immediate airspace is presently clear,' said Paliolinus. *'We proceed as parameterized.'*

Affirmatives clicked through the squadron vox. Moses cut his thrust. Gravity would soon be enough to prevent an engine stall. He angled the flaps in his tailplane to turn his nose into the clouds. A fuel alarm pinged across his neural shunt. He tapped the brass trim of the fuel gauge, but otherwise ignored it. The Xiphon was a short-range interceptor and reduced fuel capacity kept it

light. The levels remained within the III Legion's expected parameters, despite the dogfight.

'Six, ready,' Moses confirmed.

'Descent speed.' voxed Paliolinus.

The early Catherics of DuCaine's homeland had thought hell a frozen wasteland of eternal winter. It was only later iterations of the superstition that had filled it with flames, and it was the earlier interpretation of mankind's primordial dread that hit DuCaine as he hauled himself onto the thick rockcrete-block wall.

The X Legion had dug in in the basin of an extinct caldera, part of a range of mountains composed of frozen ethane that circled the southern lunar pole, near to where the warriors of the Emperor's Children were believed to have established a base of operations.

Heaving bodies of men and machines surged down the rust-coloured, semi-transparent slopes. Over a certain distance, in the dark, in tire sublimation of hydrocarbon ice to phantasmal gases, man and machine became largely indistinguishable, blobs of drab metal and void-armoured flesh, imbued by aerial flares with the colours of blood and fire. The condemned wail of the Tarantula positions was the sound to which the harrowing was played out, their screams overloading even the fine discrimination of Space Marine hearing. Denuded of that sensation, he could only *feel* the stride of the Legio Decimare as the Titans walked towards his lines. Like the beasts of Hellenic legend from which they drew their name, marching to war on the gods that had made them.

A steel plate covered the wound in the right side of DuCaine's face, but with his remaining eye he took in the state of the X Legion forces.

To his right, an aegis defence line was engaged in a blistering fire duel with a bloc of Plutonic Janissars in high-spec ice-world combat gear. To the left, a column of main-line fighting vehicles, including the precursor-pattern Sicaran battle tank *Beast of Manus*, crumbled before the weight of enemy Leman Russ Conquerors. Immediately in front of him, across the iced-up sentry lines, a horrendously outclassed formation of the Afrik Demi-Mechanised held their lines against waves of encroachment by III Legion breacher squads.

'They're coming, all right.'

He lifted his cloak in one hand to display the glittering device of Clan Sorrgol for all to see, just as a barrage of sonic claps took their shot at his punished eardrums and drew his gaze upwards. An arrowhead of Xiphon Interceptors flashed across his vantage, causing his cloak to balloon up around his fist, and gunned through a loose hail of flak towards the steaming

crags that encircled their position.

The Emperor's Children were about to learn the cost of challenging the Iron Hands in battle.

The storm had been raised.

It was time to bring down the hammer.

The drop pod's hatches blew out on impact, shattering the steeply inclined ice like docking claw and assault ramp crowbarred into one utilitarian lump of metal. Entry heat steamed off the pod's thermal shielding, anointing the Avernii Clan veterans of the First Order within with a noxious libation of aerosolised copper and gaseous hydrocarbons.

Gabriel Santar broke through the murk, down the ramp and out onto the rapidly sublimating permafrost of Vesta.

Melt vapour enveloped him. The ground beneath his armoured boots literally boiled with the infinitesimal heat that escaped their seals. His helmet display struggled to declutter, shedding icons, redrawing the concealed topography from augur inloads. All the while, irresistible forward momentum drove him down the slope towards the sounds of combat. The primarch had seen fit to honour Order Primus with the first century of prototype Cataphractii battle suits. 'We're living in a golden age,' Harik Morn had said, a wetness in his eye, as he broke open the consignment from Mars. Santar clenched one immense, crackling glove, atmosphere steaming from his grip.

It felt like he was wearing a Land Raider.

The removal and rationalisation of squad and hazard icons left two sets of runes that his authorisations could not touch. The first were the mission imperatives uploaded and installed by the primarch himself. The second was the commencement order from Lord Commander DuCaine: codephrase 'hammer'.

Typically unimaginative.

DuCaine was the last of the Terran old guard to occupy a position of high command. From the first days, the primarch had chosen to promote from his own, but DuCaine simply refused to die. Santar thought the Lord Commander a relic better suited to a position on the Clan Council lecturing neophytes on ancient histories. DuCaine thought Santar an over-promoted pup with a voice too close to the primarch's ear. Mutual antagonism made them both better warriors.

'Terminators front and centre,' he voxed. 'Breacher units to flank. Tactical squads, at a distance, overwatching the advance. Continual auspex sweeps for enemy rearguards.'

This face of the caldera had a relatively shallow grade with an aspect that

shaded it from the meagre warmth of the most proximate stars. That was enough to give it the thickest and most stable ice layer in the vicinity, and so the bulk of DuCaine's 'hammer' had been deployed here. Santar's visor display continued to update and apprise on the smaller troop and armour drops that had been deposited around the caldera basin in an encirclement position, even if he did not wish to see it. He was fiddling with the complexity of the rune display when the murmur of distant combat was broken by the crack of a solitary shot.

For the count of about three seconds, the Terminators continued to plod forwards as if nothing had happened. Then the Order auspex trooper, Joraan, marked out from his brethren by the twanging sensor pole, dropped with a helmet splattered with red. *Damn.* A count of about three seconds more and the Terminators were still grinding downhill. They were too bulky to stop. *Damn.*'

Bolter-fire echoed from the ice ridge above the drop pods, and suddenly Santar's carefully ordered rune display was awash with auspex hits.

The more mobile tactical and breacher squads turned to face the threat and were methodically picked off, all while Santar and a hundred of the X Legion's best stomped and slipped down the slope.

'Back,' he bellowed, into the vox and through his voice augmitter grilles. 'Back up to the drop pods. We'll use their cover to make a stand.' His armour's mission imperatives registered non-penetrating hits to back and arm. Trembling with fury, he aimed behind him and shredded the melt fog with fire from his combi-bolter.

Defeat he could bear. Humiliation he refused to tolerate.

The ground beneath his feet hissed and bubbled, fissuring beneath his weight and spewing boiling ethane over his boots as he finally managed to arrest his forward charge.

The high-powered whine of at least twenty cold-stressed suspensor/repulsor drives drew Santar's ire before he could give it a target of his own choosing. A squadron of jetbikes pierced the ice haze like throwing knives. Their purple cowlings were decorated with chipped ice and stylised equidae, the brilliant palatine aquila on their front fairings proudly displayed in gold. Two Cataphractii were gunned down in the process of turning towards the initial ambush, the jetbikes naught but the rumour of engine noise, before Santar and the remainder of his warriors could bring their heavier guns to bear.

'I thought that you were the heroes in this conflict, *brother*!' Santar spat after them. He scanned the melt vapours with his full suite of instruments, but could still detect nothing but ghosts and static echoes. He cursed the loss of his auspex trooper. 'What manner of hero fights with such cowardice?'

'The one that wins, captain.' The disembodied reply came from the mist. 'The one that always wins.'

Another blizzard of gunfire dropped a handful of his Terminators, but for the most part the new-pattern armour held up to the punishment, the warriors adopting a defensive ring with red paint splattered all over their ebon war-plate.

As the echoes of the volley faded, the III Legion crystallised from the mist to take its place.

Their war-plate was highly elaborate, gilded with ebru and hagiography, their softseals cloaked with fine silks that rippled under the gentlest motion. They wore long red cloaks buckled with elaborate clasps, and came armed with a variety of melee weapons, many with one in each hand. To Santar's chagrin he saw that there were Iron Hands amongst their number. He saw Veneratii Urien, built like a bull grox, an enormous power-axe in each chain-wrapped fist. And there, Harik Morn, charging at his former brethren with a chainsword held in a two-handed butcher's grip. Santar emptied a full magazine into Morn's plastron as the mingled-blade brotherhood of the III Legion slammed into a wall of iron plate.

Or rather, it didn't. It hit the wall the way a fog would. Swordsmen ducked under blows, around guards, slipped through gaps to assail their larger and more ponderous adversaries from all sides. Urien and Morn were the best warriors in the clan, and Santar had little doubt that the bladesmen attacking him now were drawn from the finest of the III Legion's Second Company.

There was some satisfaction at the fact that they had come for him rather than for DuCaine.

'You are dead, captain.'

Santar turned his head towards the voice, the awesome bulk of his armour following a second after.

Captain Akurduana's armour was more gold than purple, the fine etching of his signature tughra flowing around the left side of the chest plastron and down his arm. The palatine aquila spread across the width of his chest-plate looked bright enough to take wing. A horsehair plume trailed from his helmet, red cloak fluttering as the bolters on the crags took shots at anything that came within six metres of their captain. Except for Santar. Akurduana clearly wanted him for himself. The captain bore two long swords, but had only seen fit to draw one. The other remained as pure statement unrequited, sheathed in yellow silk at his hip. Rumour had it he was good, best in the Legion.

Santar wasn't in his Legion.

'Not yet, I'm not. You're splitting hairs.' Akurduana shrugged and leapt into the attack.

Santar took a step back, but his armour was too cumbersome, too slow, and he instead let it take the blade across the chest plating before lashing out with his lightning claw. With a weapon like that he only needed to hit his enemy once. The air burned as the energised gauntlet passed through it, but Akurduana evaded as though Santar's intent had been inscribed on the face of his helmet.

A dragged sidestep, a pivot, and then a strike so glancing it was almost casual, and Santar's gauntlet smashed into the permafrost.

A geyser of fast-thawed ethane magma smote his faceplate, bent his neck hard back against his gorget bundles, and punched him onto his back.

He gave an impotent howl as the sublimation of the ground from under him stymied his attempt to rise. With what sounded like a sigh, Akurduana brought his blade to Santar's throat seals.

Up close Santar could appreciate the craftsmanship. One warrior to another. As fine as anything made by the hands of Ferrus Manus.

He had a moment to think of something biting to utter in defeat before the primarch's mission imperatives blinked in his display, expanding to flush his visor with red light and his non-critical armour systems with disabling code. He saw Harik Morn stagger towards him, cradling a section of plastron that had been pummelled so hard with noospherically active red pigment that the plate had actually been breached.

'Damn, brother. You're taking this seriously.'

Santar could only admire Ferrus Manus' foresight. Without the disablement protocols he would have torn Akurduana's head off about now. Exercise or no exercise.

'I'm sorry, captain,' said Akurduana, and appeared to mean it. 'But this time you really are dead.'

'Everyone asks me about the hands, but they were not what struck me when I first met Ferrus Manus. It was the eyes. To look into them is to look into a mirror too dark and vast to reflect anything but that which it wishes. There is beauty in that, after a fashion…'

- The Remembrances of Akurduana, Vol. CCLXVII,
The Fall of the Lords of Gardinaal

TWO

With a little over forty years out of Luna drydock, the *Fist of Iron* was young and headstrong. If she could appear, at times, intemperate, then Adept Xanthus, Mechanicum representative to the 52nd Expedition Fleet, was swift to point out that such bellicosity was only to be expected in a fiery spirit still unsure of her strength. Beams of nanoposited plasteel groaned under the weight of titanic real-space engines, life-support systems of the most advanced and adaptive design to have emerged from the laboria of Terra since the Dark Age of Technology cycled the atmosphere with the vehemence of a fire-breathing drake. An outsider might have mistaken the carbonaceous dust on uncommonly stiff breezes as a symptom of deterioration, but that was how the Medusans liked it And to her bones, of basalt quarried from the Felgarrthi plains, the *Fist of Iron* was a Medusan ship.

She would be the first of many.

From her bristling, fully automated gun decks to her ablative hull armour, from her interplexed auspex and augur systems to her Geller generators and every aspect of her interiors, the loosed genius of Ferrus Manus had been poured into her design. As Medusa was dark, so too was *Fist of Iron*, lit only by the glow of consoles and of luminescent stones quarried from the seabeds of Medusa and inset into the ceiling fixtures. As Medusa was frigid and hostile, so too then was *Fist of Iron*, hundreds upon hundreds of kilometres of corridors and crawlways sheathed in ironglass and stone, every wheel hatch

as magnificently austere as the frozen tundra of Karaashi. Better to carry the distemper of the primarch's adoptive home world to the stars and to take pride in it than to let comfort moderate their warrior spirit.

And as with Medusa herself, the surface cold was a front for a broiling inner fire.

Moses Trurakk remained plugged into the Xiphon's slumbering spirit long after the deckhands had completed post-flight checks and logged off-shift. The glow strips were dimmed, his eyes closed, but his mind was alive with sensation. Copper-brown clouds. The roar of engines. A glimpse of black, the wing of an aircraft as it rolled out of his crosshairs.

You need a lighter touch on the ailerons. Without opening his eyes, he brushed the flap levers with his fingers, then moved to the flight stick. *Not so belligerent with the stick. She wants to fly, brother. Let her.* He bit back the urge to answer the memory, nudging the unpowered stick left, right. Even in her sleep, the Xiphon longed to be airborne.

A Terran would have been hesitant about describing such experiences as dreams. The aircraft's flight cogitator had been powered down, shut off from external stimuli, allowing its combat logs to be decompiled for exload. But he was Medusan. Reverence of the machine came as naturally as turning his face from the wind. He knew that it dreamed.

Do you love her, brother? I know that you talk to her when you're alone in there.

The black-hulled Primaris-lightning came into view. Its appearance spiked his bloodstream with adrenal compounds, enough to make him forget that this was not his dream. He triggered the lascannons. In the deserted hangar, nothing happened, but in the dream shared between Moses and the Xiphon, bolts of ultra high-energy las streaked across the jinking strike fighter.

Combat is more than numbers and angles. It is a joust.

As a mortal he had grown up with machines. Life on Medusa depended on their protection and their favour. They demanded respect, not love, and each of the Legion's machines had their own character, their own favourites. The Xiphon chafed against its pairing as vociferously as Moses had at first. He could hardly blame it for fighting him.

My brother doth protest too much.

Moses shook his head. The last thing he needed was his wing-brother's words looping around the Xiphon's already truculent spirit as it slept.

'After the Lightning,' he murmured, pulling lightly on the stick. 'We will do it right this time.'

'Trurakk?'

It took Moses a moment to register that Ortan Vertanus' voice had not arisen from the exload dream. He tried to focus. The Lightning. It was moving off, about to thrust out.

'I know you're in there - I can see your carapace lights from here.'

'I am practising,' he snapped back through gritted teeth, trying to hold on to the dream.

'We all know you need the practice, but enough is enough. You smother her with your affections.'

Moses became aware of chuckles. But not, this time, from the dashboard vox.

'I recognise every word you use, but put together they make no sense to me.'

'Disconnect yourself, Trurakk.' This voice belonged to Wing Commander Paliolinus. The tone it used sternly discouraged further argument.

Reluctantly, Moses reached behind his neck and detached the neural shunt. It came away from his skull with a crunch of metal. Immediately the simulus glitched, then died. He took a deep breath of *Fist of Iron's* cold, caustic air, blinking quickly to reacquaint himself to this version of reality. He was still in the Xiphon's cockpit, but the canopy was up and it was dark, illuminated only, as Vertanus had pointed out, by the point lights of his flight carapace.

Still blinking, he leaned from his cockpit, carapace creaking, and saw the Emperor's Children of Scythe squadron were all down there. Edoran. Dour, impossible-to-please Edoran. His wing-brother, Thyro, holding a glass and wearing a stretched grin. Paliolinus' laconic wing-brother, Sekka, standing with crossed arms and peering into the darkened hangar with professional interest.

'Did you hear?' said Edoran, his expression characteristically heavy and joyless. Plug-in sites and noospheric tethers showed like chunky jewellery under the collar of his carapace. 'The next time we fly together it won't be a game. It's not just *Kama* with whom you need to develop an understanding. Men, too, have their singular natures.'

The Xiphon's name meant something like 'stiletto' or 'blade' in Captain Akurduana's ancestral tongue. Moses hated it.

'Hurry up and get down,' said Thyro wearily. 'Before he really starts.'

'I do not understand how fraternising will facilitate an understanding of relevance.'

'They're not all like that, are they?' Vertanus asked.

'The Captain introduced me to Lord Commander DuCaine,' said Paliolinus. 'So I can say not.' The wing commander looked up at Moses. 'You are about to fraternise and you are going to enjoy it. That's an order.'

'What do you have in mind?'

Moses had come up with all manner of theories on the sorts of activities that the Emperor's Children might consider diverting. None of them good.

'Trust me,' said Paliolinus. 'You'll like it.'

On either side of a large hemispherical dais, huge grinding pistons rose and fell in the smoke-wreathed penumbra of a Medusan night. The distant clangour of hammers and presses trembled through the sheet flooring. Steam rose from the gratings, condensing almost as soon as it hit the cold air to dew on the handrail that circumferenced the curved edge of the dais. The cavernous space was pungent with hot oils and solder and the visceral power of the machine.

The Anvilarium reminded Akurduana of the manufactories of the Urals, though even the X Legion's colossal flagship, for all its youthful distemper, could not rival those cathedrals of industry for scale.

Flattening the damp sheaf of parchment between his hands, Akurduana examined the charcoal sketch he had made of the scene with a critical eye. He had captured perfectly the sense of motion, the way the surfaces trembled, how the interplay of hanging vapours and the lume stones embedded in the ironglass and gilt candelabrum crafted a chiaroscuro of black and grey. But his attempts at conveying the sense of awe that he had been hoping for had not been borne out. His intent had been to evoke the memories of Manraga, or Narodnya, but the Dark Age grandeur of those gothic forges was nowhere to be found in his work.

In a moment of anger he tossed his stick of charcoal aside, over the outer rim of the dais and far, *far* to the lower enginarium decks.

'Captain.'

Startled from his reflections, Akurduana looked up.

A single bridge traversed the heaving machine pits from aft. The heavy-booted step of Captain Gabriel Santar rattled the gang-plates and twanged the cable stays like a score plucked along a tuneless harp as he crossed to the dais. Though he had removed his helm and gauntlet, he remained otherwise clad as he had been on Vesta. He smelled of grease and sweat and engine heat. His features still bore Vesta's chill in their crags. The immense armature of his Cataphractii plate glittered with trembling droplets of condensed vapour.

Akurduana wondered if it was a deliberate show of strength. 'Gabriel.' He dipped his head respectfully. 'It was an honour to match swords. You did well. Your choice of drop site was just a little obvious. And Amadeus does tend to forget that I was there in Central Afrik. And the Panpacific.' He sighed. 'The Imperium was smaller then. I was not on Rust, of course, but he never was one to vary a winning formula.'

Santar shrugged off the platitude. 'You're early.'

'I enjoy the solitude. It is hard to find on your ship.'

The loss of the III Legion's gene stocks after the battle of Proxima had decimated the Legion's strength. He had been one of the Two Hundred. With Fulgrim's aid they had recovered, but they were still not a numerous Legion. Like many of his brothers, Akurduana had come to prefer it that way. Empty halls left room for reflection. 'What were you doing?' said Santar, leaning forward.

Akurduana folded the flawed sketch and tucked it away in his sleeve. 'Nothing. A diversion.'

'Is it any good?'

'It depends what you want from it.'

'Do you think it good?'

Akurduana frowned. 'No.'

'I've been supervising the return of my company and equipment from Vesta. And you've been… drawing?'

'I assure you, the warriors you loaned me are in capable hands. But when one finds that one has attained perfection within a certain field, there is little point in pursuing it further.'

The Iron Hand bridled. 'Perfection? A bold claim.'

Akurduana shrugged. Perhaps, but it had been three hundred years since he had been reborn unto the Emperor's likeness, and he had not been beaten yet. Santar remained quiet.

It fell to the machines of the enginarium to fill the gulf between brothers.

'You did well enough too,' the legionary finally conceded. He looked awkward, as though ill-accustomed to hearing praise spoken aloud in this place. 'I've never seen those handled with such skill.'

He referred to the two blades that rested in silk scabbards at Akurduana's hips. *Timur* had a grip of woven gold, its blade slightly curved, and a shaped pommel in the form of a stallion's head with a tassel of black horsehair. *Athenia* was longer, its fuller deadly straight, its crossguard narrow, Grekan runes of abstract meaning glittering the length of the thinly covered blade. They were charnabal sabres, forged to unique ritual and alchemical preparations by a master maker of old Terra. To possess one was the Legion's highest honour for swordsmanship.

He had two.

'Is it true that you once fought the Emperor?'

Akurduana burst with laughter.

'Is that what Gaius says? I am not quite that good, but like all good tales there is some truth to it. My father by birth was Battle-King of the Turkic

Nomadiaspora. He fought Unification to the bitter end.' His smile grew strained. His memories of mortal childhood were dim, but filled with warmth and an affection he could no longer reproduce. Holding on to them was like holding a beautiful sword by the blade. 'I am told he did indeed face the Emperor sword to sword in defence of the Bosporus canyon. I was his firstborn, last heir to the Bosporic Turks, a token of the Nomadiaspora's compliance to the Emperor of all Mankind. There were many like me then, tithed from collapsed or compliant dynasties to raise the Third.'

'And how many of those continue to Crusade?'

He shrugged.

'I'd consider it an honour to cross blades with you once more in the cages.'

Akurduana sighed, reached up to take Santar's vapour-dampened pauldron in his hand, and smiled ruefully. 'Take a place in line, brother.'

Before the Iron Hand's frown could develop further, the doors at the aft end of the footbridge irised open and a procession of disparately robed and liveried figures filed through. Santar pivoted his enormous armoured frame to look over his shoulder, granting Akurduana a view.

Leading the procession with giant strides was Lord Commander Amadeus DuCaine.

Like Akurduana, he had taken advantage of his respite to change and to bathe, and was clad now in a sleeveless vest and breeches of coarse black animal hair, covered by a fur-lined cloak trimmed with silver that hung to his knees. His muscular forearms were clapped in silver torques bearing the icons of the Storm Walkers, symbols of the past and a clear allusion to a powerful present. Even without the archaic bulk of his Thunder Armour, the Lord Commander's presence was immense. His features were old Nordic, his body put together like the storm god of the Vikingyr. His short hair was granite-grey, towelled dry and spiky. His face was a legacy of conquest written in transhuman flesh, both record of honour and testament to the determination of the X Legion continually to return so battered a frame to the front line. Shrugging off the regimental staffers that harried his steps, like a warrior-king pursued by attention-starved hounds, DuCaine crossed to Santar and Akurduana.

'You put on your usual good show. They'll be talking about the day you put Santar on his arse for years.'

Santar crossed his arms and said nothing. So that was why the legionary was so keen to face him again - to recover pride.

Akurduana shook his head. Another good reason to avoid entering a cage with the First Captain. No need to rub salt in that wound.

'Look alive,' DuCaine grunted, as the murmurs of the gathering officers

abated, and straightened his back to stand to attention.

Set in the uncurved edge of the dais opposite the bridge was a door, a masterpiece of glittering diorite, white marble and iron. The vertical seam carried a relief of a hammer striking an anvil, impact fractures picked out in veins of silver. Elsewhere in the diorama were three-headed chimerae, ocean krakens and other legendary beasts of Medusa. It was the portal to the Iron Forge, the primarch's most closely guarded Reclusiam, and in a hiss of steam and a wave of drying heat, the doors parted. Akurduana's skin tightened as it was dried, his hearts beating faster. As if he were a questing knight of old before the lair of a dragon. He swallowed hard.

A week of exercises, feasts and cultural indoctrination, and this would be his first time in the presence of Ferrus Manus himself.

Conversation ceased. Men dropped to their knees. Two veterans in the armour and markings of the Avernii Clan strode through the gate and took stations either side of the glowing portal. The dulled steel of their Terminator plate steamed up at once, wreathed in the vapours that climbed from the decks below, but for the white fire of their helmet lenses. Past the sentinels marched two more warriors. The embossed nameplates on their high gorget rims identified them. Veneratii Urien. Harik Morn. Akurduana knew both warriors well. Neither one acknowledged him or any other as they emerged. They bore the primarch's banners.

To the left, a metaphor for the symbolic hand that was taken by so many of the Iron Hands, went the Iron Gauntlet of the Legion. The banner's device was stitched in silver on a field of black velvet. The edges were ripped and torn, as though attacked by dogs, re-sewn hundreds of times over to be made fit for the Emperor's war. Symbols within symbols. To the right went Ferrus Manus' personal standard. An opus in velvet and an abundance of silver, it depicted hit vanquishing of the silver wyrm, Asirnoth.

The Anvilarium had no table or chairs, no inbuilt precedence by which to arrange those present, and so low and high, mortal and giant transhuman mixed, like so many immiscible fluids forced into a crucible. The mortals were all men and women that Akurduana had been shown picts of, or traded brief introductions with over the past days, all of them palpably uncomfortable to be rubbing shoulders with the giant legionaries of the X and III. In addition to Caius Caphen and Paliolinus, Akurduana recognised faces that belonged to names such as Vaakal Desaan, Autek Mor, Ulrach Branthan, Shadrak Meduson. He had yet to meet any of them personally.

The arrival of the standard bearers and their massive wargear forced them all back to the rim of the dais, and without further herald, the primarch of the Iron Hands entered his Anvilarium.

Akurduana fell to his knees with a gasp. He had meant to take his cue from the Iron Hands around him, but the act of obeisance was instinctual, the only rational recourse to the presence of a demi-god.

The primarch was to Fulgrim as iron to gold. He was a rugged, brutal giant, his height and breadth staggering even to one who had fought alongside such beings and seen them bleed as other men. His pale flesh was knotted and scarred, for his heart was that of a conqueror. He had brought to heel the most hostile of worlds known to the Imperium of Man, his own, and never once had he shirked from leading by example. His brow was furrowed and judgemental. His shale-coloured hair was cropped short.

His armour was black, every surface hand-forged and perfect. Master Adept Malevolus - the same Master Adept Malevolus that had crafted Horus' famous war-plate - had had a hand in its making, but the instinctual metallurgy of Ferrus Manus himself was present in the acme of every accoutrement and curve. A high gorget of black iron rose at the back of the neck, silver edge-trims studded with rivets. The gauntlet emblem on his mangled shoulder guard had been fashioned from a single piece of hand-beaten iron. Over the opposite shoulder there hung a cloak of thick mail rings, the immense warhammer, *Forgebreaker*, hefted across it. The hand that gripped the ebon haft was molten, iridescent metal emitting a siren chorus of brushed steel as it lapped about the primarch's forearm with an apparent life of its own.

His eyes captivated the chamber. They were like silver coins, unreflective, remote, and yet utterly enthralling. Akurduana felt the awe he had earlier sought to conjure through his art rise in him unbidden.

Ferrus Manus was not renowned for his beauty. He did not haunt the dreams of men in the way of Fulgrim or Sanguinius or Homs, but he *was* beautiful, as a chamabal sabre or a hand-wrought suit of armour could be beautiful. Akurduana saw now why Fulgrim loved this Gorgon so, and why that love was reciprocated so fiercely.

He was perfect, perfect in every way.

'My sons,' said Ferrus, his voice like beaten lead, his demand for absolute perfection in all things like a hand pressing bowed heads towards the ground. 'You shame me.'

The Iron Hands adored their brutal father, but biddable they were not. They responded to their primarch's accusation with predictable outcry. It could not last. Their choler was, to his, as a candle flame to a vacuum.

'I did not propose this exercise with my brother in the expectation of seeing my warriors bested.' Santar made as if to speak out, but a look from his primarch silenced him. 'It was to demonstrate my Legion's prowess, and by reflection *my* prowess.' The effort of marshalling his frustrations was clearly

immense. Akurduana doubted he made the effort for his own legionaries' benefit. 'It seems that the Third Legion has much to teach us.'

'We'll adapt, do better next time,' DuCaine spoke out. 'That was the point, wasn't it?'

Ferrus Manus smouldered for what felt like half a minute.

'There will be no next time. While you were engaged on Vesta, word was received from the Ultramarines of the 413th Expedition. Our brothers call for aid.'

A warship of the III Legion would have rejoiced at news of another Legion's crusades. Space was vast, dispatches rare, and so even word of their brothers' travails came as a rare gift in what could be a lonely war. The same, he was sure, would ordinarily have been true for the *Fist of Iron*, though he suspected that news of another's glories would be less a cause for celebration than a goad towards greater triumphs of their own. But pride had been stung, and the Iron Hands brooded as Ferrus went on.

'The 413th is a minor expeditionary force, five regiments of the Imperial Army, two thousand legionary warriors, predominantly Thirteenth Legion. They were tasked with the compliance of a solar empire ruled by a technologically equivalent human offshoot called the Gardinaal. Emissaries of my brother Magnus' Legion were dispatched to negotiate a peaceable transition to Imperial rule. Their industrial capacity and military strength were, apparently, deemed sufficient to justify… concessions.' His mouth twisted with disdain. 'A miscalculation. Strength respects only strength. The Ultramarines stepped in when negotiations failed. At present, that is all we know.'

'We can't answer every plea for help,' said Santar. 'The Twelfth Expedition is not much further from Gardinaal than we are. Let Lord Guilliman bear the burden of his own failure.'

'You cannot be serious,' Akurduana cried, shouting down the muttered chorus of agreement. He stepped into the empty space that had grown around the primarch and his vexillaries. 'Warriors of the Legiones Astartes perish on worlds that are the rightful inheritance of mankind. A blow struck against one is a blow struck against all and against the Emperor himself, beloved by all. Are we to let that stand, we who stand together now and dare to call one another brother?'

A shimmer of approval spirited across the liquid silver of Ferrus' eyes, but the primarch made no further contribution.

'Extensive ground and fleet deployments have been made to numerous joint exercises around Vesta and her nearspace environs,' said Adept Xanthus, Mechanicum representative to the 52nd Expedition.

'Aye,' said Laeric. The *Fist of Iron's* shipmaster was a bull of a man, thick neck, full beard, broad chest, all constrained within a stiff military-black staff coat bursting with medals. His bald head shone. 'It'll take time to claw it all back.'

The feudal structures of the Iron Hands were difficult for an outsider to understand.

In place of the companies and Chapters of the *Principia Bellicosa* were independent and often competing clans. Each clan was self-sufficient, distinct in character and strength, but functioned like an interlocking cog in the great war machine of Ferrus Manus' construction. The Legion as a whole was a leviathan. Once in motion it was unstoppable, but its semi-autonomous structures and its many independent hierarchies made it difficult to organise on such a scale. The 52nd Expedition Fleet boasted about two-thirds of the Legion's strength: seventy thousand legionaries, six million Army and skitarii auxilia, and a pool of war machines the envy even of Guilliman and Lorgar and the very largest of the Space Marine Legions.

It took some turning.

'The Crusade is changing,' said Ferrus distantly. 'The days when I could count my rivals on one hand are gone forever.' He studied his metal hand, it and his eyes setting up a mutually non-reflective play of convection patterns and colour. 'There are those amongst my brothers who doubt me.'

'My lord primarch…' Akurduana stepped forward, denial bursting from his breast.

Ferrus Manus shook his head. 'There are those who doubt. The Crusade is changing, and all must be proven anew. *I* will save the 413th. I will show Roboute what my Legion is capable of as I drag his warriors from the precipice.'

'Second Company will go wherever you bid, my lord,' said Akurduana. 'We are yours until Fulgrim returns to command otherwise.'

Watching Ferrus smile was like watching steel cool into the shape of a blade.

'Indeed. We will see how much there is to be learned from one another when our weapons are live and our brothers stand or fall by our strength.'

Akurduana smiled to see III and X Legion officers subtly reevaluating one another's measure. Call it strength that these beings aspired to, call it perfection.

Call it competition.

'You have proven your competence,' Ferrus said to him. 'And my brother speaks of you highly.' Fulgrim was more fulsome in his praises than his brother, but Akurduana held his counsel. Fie had the feeling that this had less to do with honouring him than it did with censuring others. And perhaps it

was partly about sending a message to his brother primarchs that he could lead. With an even temper and an even hand. The Crusade was changing. Or so went the rumour. 'I would have you assume the role of my equerry, for as long as the compliance of Gardinaal requires.'

Akurduana heard Santar's sharp intake of breath. But the primarch had not, he noted, given him an option to refuse. Unsure what else to do under such circumstances, Akurduana acceded to the unwanted honour with a bow.

'It is my privilege to serve the Gorgon.'

There were two fighters in the cage.

The warrior of the Emperor's Children, Moses did not know, though given his current assignment he realised that he probably should. The warrior was an Adonis of hard muscle and calligraphic tattoos, his cream toga hanging over his cincture to give him a double-layered skirt and a bare chest. His hair was copper-gold, tied in a warrior braid wound several times around his neck. For a warrior of his apparent age, his physique was pristine. There was not a scar or a bionic graft on him. It was as though he had been sculpted from mother-of-pearl.

The Iron Hands legionary that opposed him could not have been more different.

The Avernii Clan veteran was a siege tank, a hulking agglomeration of rods, plates and stupendously enlarged musculature that glistened with oils. His face, ablatively reconstructed and slab-featured, was alight with anticipation.

Veneratii Urien, everyone knew.

Amongst the Vurgaan clan he had been a legend, a Terran, but the fiercest proponent of the clan's ancient credo of efficiency and power. There were plenty among the Clan Fathers who still resented the Avernii Clan for poaching their most celebrated captain. Moses had fought in several skirmishes and one pitched battle over the slight, but held no personal rancour towards Urien. A position with the Avernii Clan's First Order was what any warrior of Urien's status and ambition aspired to. Moses would have done the same. 'Are we wagering?' said Moses.

Vertanus laughed. 'You're one of us now, brother. We wouldn't do that to you.'

'Not so fast,' said Paliolinus. 'We may have just discovered an actual vice in our new brother. This needs to be nurtured and encouraged.' The wing commander's face was alabaster pale and without flaw, but for a tiny shrapnel scar that cleft the top of his cheek like a teardrop. His face was expressive, quick to smile, but there was steel there that only a fool could miss. His eyes, when they set upon a thing, were as piercing and as cold as diamond. 'If Urien

triumphs then you can sit in that cockpit until *Kama* returns with us to the *Pride of the Emperor*. I promise no one will bother you.'

'And if yours wins?'

Something about that raised chuckles all around.

'Don't you even recognise Captain Akurduana?' Vertanus asked. 'It's not entirely surprising,' Edoran sniffed. 'He's a very arms-length commander.'

Moses frowned and looked again.

The cage was one of the smaller examples of the sparring rings that filled the Practice Hall. Barely big enough for two, it was built for grapples and throws, trials of balance and upper body strength at which the Iron Hands traditionally excelled and for which Veneratii Urien could have been custom-made. He was aware of Akurduana's reputation, but this contest was skewed against him. 'Agreed.'

'It's your coin,' Edoran snorted, turning to watch the fight.

Lord Commander DuCaine pushed through the crowd of eager spectators to thump his fists against the bars and bellowed, 'Fight!'

Urien and Akurduana were already close enough to taste the oils on the other's flesh. At the Lord Commander's shout Urien exploded forward like an armour-plated grox given an electric shock, intending to wrestle his opponent to the ground. Akurduana should have been flattened. Simple as that.

No matter how Moses tweaked his understanding of spatial geometry and bodily mechanics he could not understand how he was not.

Urien's face crashed into the bars. Akurduana was behind him, driving him to his knees with one of his own buried in a little-known pressure point under the oolitic kidney. Urien struggled for a moment, red-faced, but the effort clearly caused him pain. He winced, then finally grunted in surrender.

DuCaine was still getting his breath back.

It had taken about half a second.

'What just happened?' Moses muttered as DuCaine began to thump his hands together and encourage the stunned legionaries to cheer.

Vertanus had the good grace to look guilty about allowing a brother to take the wager, even as he clapped along approvingly. 'Victories to come, brother.'

THREE

Gardinaal was a solar empire of eleven worlds. From the ferocious hot Jupiter of Quintus to the sunless nitrogen glaciers of Undecimus, through several hundred moons and several thousand larger asteroids, the system was densely populated and hyper-industrialised. While the Gardinaal had retained a number of Dark Age technologies that had been lost to the Imperium, and vice versa, its claim to exceptionalism was its incredible population, and the societal structure that allowed it to be sustained. After five thousand years of exploitation, their sole resource was human. The jewel in the crown was Gardinaal Prime, so called for being the first of the Eleven Worlds to have been colonised. Once a paradise in a string of stars known to early wayfarers as Astrid's Necklace, it was home now to a hundred billion immiserated souls.

Having abandoned warp technology during the anarchy of the Age of Strife, the Gardinaal had minimal aspirations beyond absolute dominion over their own stellar imperium. Only once in their long history had they been challenged by an extra-solar power, but the lords of the Gardinaal existed outside of death, or so the statemachine proclaimed, and forgot nothing. Their military was vast, effectively numberless, surpassing even the cumulative might of old Sol at its most warlike peak, before the ascension of the Emperor of Man. In five thousand years they had never known defeat.

As of 869.M30 that claim was dust.

But the Gardinaal had bodies to burn and no compunction about doing so if

that was to be the price of victory. And if the Emperor desired the compliance of their world, then he would be made to pay for it in kind.

Fat sparks sprayed from the emergency bulkhead, hanging in null-G as though time had been locally flash-chilled and frozen. A hard smash of metal into metal and the illusion was broken. There was a shriek as a rectangular section came away, capturing the hovering sparks and shunting them down the hallway, only the meagre gravity of the ship's own mass and thin air to slow it before it hit the next bulkhead thirty metres on. The figure that emerged through the breach was indescribable.

He was two and a half metres of ornate ceramic war-plate, his passage through the ruined bulkhead bringing tearing squeals from the remnants of the frame. His helmet was frilled with rivets, and visored as though bearing a huge set of fangs. Eye lenses glowed In the dark, two sharpened triangles of watery gold. He surpassed anything that the curates of the Eugenics Ministry could have imagined by ten thousand years.

The last sparks from the carving of the bulkhead lied around the Immense curvature of his armour. Cobalt blue faded to nightshade as the embers burned out. Forcing the corridor, through more metallic scrapes, to accommodate his inhuman bulk, he brought up a weapon. The gun was no less gigantic. It looked as though it belonged to a mount at the front of a tank rather than the gauntlets of a living being. He aimed down the corridor.

The Imperial should have known better.

The Gardinaal attacked from above.

A torrent of gamma beams bracketed the Imperial in green light. With a shrieking effort the brute got its elbows under him to aim upwards and fire. The weapon roared like a beast in a cage A sustained burst of explosive shells tore into the piping that knotted the ceiling as the prehensile shadow scrambled into the ductwork. The Imperial lowered his weapon, a threatening sound growling from his helmet maw, and dragged himself side-on down the corridor. His armour glowed like a radioactive crystal. Not so much as a scratch.

No sooner had he cleared the bulkhead than a second giant pushed through behind him. He carried a weapon of a different kind. It was baffled and vaned, the muzzle shrouding itself in a heat haze, ribbed hoses of uncertain purpose floating in the null-G. His lenses flickered, strange runes displayed inwards to the giant's eyes. His weapon tracked along the ceiling. Waited. Waited. Pressurised gas vented from the mauled piping. A muffled *clank* sounded from one of the wall spaces. Like something soft hitting a pipe.

The muzzle of his weapon glowed white. There was no sound, no beam or

projectile, but the section of wall he aimed at simply bubbled and dissolved.

The warrior void-caste drifted limply from the crawlspace, metal droplets and bloody smears orbiting the remains of its body.

The lead Imperial sent it floating back with a prod of his heavy gun.

The void-caste was both more and less human than his killers, though it was clear they did not see it that way.

Its body was all muscle, but no bigger than a child's. Its eyes were evolutionary holdovers covered by a black film, its mouth small and ovoid for suckle feeding. Its skin was black, covered with a secreted body plastic to shield against cosmic rays. The coating would have served equally against the lingering dose of its gamma blaster, had it been able to down the armoured Imperial. Most perverse, however, were its limbs. All four terminated in long-fingered hands. The warrior void-caste were the most extreme branch that had emerged from the cultivated phyla of the Gardinaal, but so too was the environment they had been bred to inhabit.

The reversed displays in the lead Imperial's lenses danced, too quickly to be read, as it examined the hanging corpse. Growls of noise emerged from their grilles, but they spoke on a closed network that did not carry beyond the confines of their war-plate.

'Go closer.'

The observing projection obeyed.

'This ship was not made for humans, never mind Legiones Astartes,' the leader complained to the melta-warrior.

'Just keep forward. Amar is adamant that one of their psykers is aboard, and —'

Alerted by something, some phantom noise perhaps, or by an innate sixth sense, the second Imperial snatched up his melta-weapon and aimed it down the corridor.

Sylvyn Dekka's eyes widened as he found himself staring down the hissing bore of the Imperial device. The Imperial looked equally astonished. The old man opened his mouth to scream as…

…his mind snapped back into his body. His thoughts sank. Like light hitting mud. A pressure built in his chest as he felt his spirit shrink, his skin withering, vertebrae fusing and causing his spine to curl, as though his spirit had aged fifty years in a fluttering squeeze of a living heart. He heard his own scream. A ragged thing, quickly wheezing to nothing at all as his body crumpled. Had he been still on Undecimus then he would have folded to his knees and, even on that tiny world's meagre gravity, most likely broken them. As it was, his knees folded in to him and he pitched awkwardly forward. The

joints all down his arm popped in protest as he drew it between his face and the incoming metal decking.

As a younger man, he might - if he had spared the thought - have considered null-G a natural equaliser for the elderly and frail.

It was certainly easier to move about on the void-caste frigate than on a planet, but the danger of accidental self-harm on a bulkhead or piece of equipment never went away.

With shaking hands he guided himself back along the decking and into a corner where he could catch his breath in some safety.

His cellmates watched him. There were three of them in the double bunk and the single wall-integrated chair, hair lank and unwashed, kitted in featureless black jumpsuits: a subaltern of the vox caste, a tertius adjutant of the famulus caste, an unranked young woman of the pacifier caste. The state departments of Undecimus had designated them all as 'Expired': old age, old age, and some kind of inflammatory bowel condition. Their return to Gardinaal Prime would see the institutes of Human Resourcing ensure that their stripped flesh and ground bones provided one final service to the state. That he should know so much about his cellmates and not their names did not strike him as odd. Their psychic auras were sterile to him; their faces bore the patient docility of thoroughbreds, but they were afraid. He saw it in the tension with which they gripped the foot of the bunk and the rivet-holds on the bulkhead.

A distant rattle of bolter-fire shredded the empyreal phantom he had set to walking about the ship, and he rubbed at the projected pain in his chest with a shudder. The others murmured fearfully. 'What did you see?' The young pacifier leaned forwards.

Eyes in the dark. Sharpened triangles. Watery gold.

He shivered, and not with the frigate's usual cold. 'Boarders.'

A hard bang against the door brought startled noises from them all.

'High Consul Dekka.' The voice from the other side of the cell door was hollow, blank as a sheet of glass. Nothing at all like the Imperials he had followed. He allowed the scraps of power he had been hoarding to dissipate back into his psyche. His body might have been old, but his mind was strong, and although the abilities of the consular caste were not geared directly towards combat he believed he could disable one Imperial warrior if it came to it. Maybe two. 'The interment manifest lists this as your cell. Were you injured during the attack?'

The locking spirit bleeped and the door irised open.

The man in the corridor was a supercilious-looking official in his late teens, hairless and wan as most of the lower-status castes of Gardinaal were genetically predisposed to be. He was garbed in a mass-printed green jacket

and trousers, exactly the same as a billion others like him from Central Processing. The light of a human soul barely penetrated the skin, as if provisioned from the same servo-line as his sanctioned attire. His expression was even, his eyes blank, any recessive alleles of individualism or empathy that had leaked through the generations thoroughly suppressed by conditioning and psychotropic treatments.

The hollowness of his voice, the non-existence of his soul, only served to further upset the loosened ties between Dekka's own soul and his body. He felt himself separate… *Eyes in the dark. Sharpened triangles. Watery gold…* before pulling himself back together with an effort of will.

'I recognise you,' he said hoarsely, holding onto the cold metal wall behind him as if it were all that kept his mind from fleeing back into the empyrean. 'Tobris Venn. The state attache. You clerked me in when I was brought aboard on Undecimus.'

The junior administrator reacted neither positively nor negatively to Dekka's recognition. He stared through the cell as if Dekka's existence was equally ambiguous. 'You need to come with me, sir.'

'Where?'

'Shortly before our ship attempted to run the Imperial blockade, I transmitted the interment manifest to Human Resourcing.' As protocol dictated. 'I then awaited confirmation while we engaged the hostile battleship.' As only a true slave to routine could. The nameless frigate currently commissioned to transport eight hundred and eleven elderly and infirm Expired was almost two hundred metres in length, protected by ablative hull armour and partial void shields, and boasted an aggressive armament of particle beamers and shield-battering macrobatteries. The greatest void-caste warships could reach double that displacement. The larger Imperial vessels exceeded them by a factor of five. 'After the shields went down and the warrior void-caste were dispatched to repel the intruders, I received priority instructions from the High Lords.' His featureless expression somehow achieved a further slackening. Awe, perhaps? 'They included launch codes for a shuttle pod and an order to return with you immediately to the surface.'

Dekka scratched his bearded cheek. The smell of burnt hair where the expiry 'X' brand had gone in came off under his fingernails. There must be a mistake.'

Venn's unblinking stare conveyed absolutely the vanishing possibility of such an occurrence arising from the High Lords. 'I have received documents granting you a temporary stay of termination, sir. Most of the consular caste perished in the Imperial reprisals.'

Eyes in the dark.

'You mean after our negotiators failed.'

'After our negotiators were slaughtered by the Imperium's so-called envoy, sir, yes.'

So unflinchingly polite, even with an Expired. 'So now I am not such a burden on the state?' Dekka surprised himself with a sardonic chuckle. 'Would you believe, I had hoped my achievements would have been sufficient for interment in the body of a High Lord myself.' He knew, of course, that the clerk would have harboured no such ambition. He was incapable of the dream, even if his caste had been high enough to justify it. 'Instead, my fate is termination. No different from these.' He waved to his cellmates.

They gave no reaction. All of their lives, and for the lives of two hundred generations before them, they had known their place.

'Such opportunities are rare,' said Venn, immune to Dekka's bitterness. 'That is the nature of immortal lords.' He stepped back and gestured down the left-hand arm of the corridor. 'If you would follow me, sir.'

Dekka closed his eyes, more than a little tempted to see the High Lords spited by allowing himself to be killed here. But obedience to the state had been bred into the consular gene-line as indelibly as it was in the lesser castes. His had simply retained the freedom of thought to realise it. With a sour taste in the back of his throat, he pushed off against the wall.

The locking spirit issued an aggrieved blurt of code as he approached, transmitting a warning shock to the electro-cue implanted into his branded cheek. Electric current jagged through his jaw and into his shoulders. He gasped in pain and shock, but Venn casually input an override code to quell the door's antipathy towards Dekka's expired status. Easy for him, to be casual about it now.

Dekka's cheek muscle was still twitching furiously as he bumped painfully out of the door and into the bulkhead opposite.

His hands were walking him down towards the deckplates as the hostile echoes of bolter-fire rang through the ductwork concealed behind the bulkhead. His fingertips trembled with it. *Eyes*. He looked right. The opposite direction to the launch bay. The orbital lighters on a void-caste ship were seldom used. The void-caste rarely left their home ship and never ventured lower than a planetary orbit, while cargo - even human cargo - would conventionally be transferred to dedicated bulk landers for the final descent. As such they were sensor-dark. Only when the proper code incant awakened its spirit core would the shuttles become visible to a standard surveyor sweep. Without physically breaking into the launch bay and seeing one, the Imperials would have no way of knowing they were aboard.

'What about us?' said the pacifier from inside the opened cell. Unlike the

other internees, she had been bred to keep her wits together in hazardous situations. Though obviously not to think for herself.

Venn regarded them all dispassionately before again interceding with the door's intelligence on their behalf. They bobbed through. The administrator pointed down the right arm of the corridor in the direction of the shooting. It was getting closer. 'Go that way.' The pacifier gave a questioning look.

'The High Lords unfortunately require you to delay the invaders on our behalf.'

The woman puffed up her chest and tensed into a rigid salute. The two older men looked less certain, but a genetic disposition towards obedience saw them bumping after her down the corridor.

Dekka watched them go without emotion. 'The Imperial fleet could blast our ship out of orbit. Why have they not?'

'The High Lords think they are looking for you.'

'Me?'

The administrator shrugged as the three internees disappeared through the far door hatch. 'It was the consular caste to whom they feigned their protestations of peace. Perhaps they see you as valuable somehow? I do not know. The High Lords have not seen fit to apprise me on that subject.' The hammering of bolter-fire and an unpleasant splattering noise from the next corridor proved ample distraction from such questions.

'I am told that the Imperium encompasses a thousand stars,' Dekka murmured.

Venn shook his head. If he was at all ruffled by the scraping noises from beyond the far hatch then nothing of it showed. 'The High Lords have decreed that the wanton exaggerations of the Imperial envoys are to be disbelieved by all citizens. The arrival of one additional reinforcement fleet in no way corroborates their false claims.'

Dekka's eyebrow lifted at that new information. Venn, meanwhile, glanced down the corridor, facial muscles resisting the deep-buried urge to bite his lip. 'That said, I am sure the High Lords would not disadvise us from hurrying.'

FOUR

The medicae decks of the XIII Legion strike cruiser *Executor* were just beginning to return to normality. Servitors with thousand-metre stares and radiation welts on their skin mopped the bloodstained tiles with monotonous, repetitive motions. The air cyclers whirred, the restorative odours of ambergris and eucalypt mixing unpleasantly with those of counterseptic and burn gels to produce something sickly. It was too warm. The lumens were sepia tinted, conspiring with heavy doses of anaesthetic to usher dying men towards sleep. It wasn't helping Tull Riordan stay awake.

He limped through the *whoosh* of a decontamination curtain, his cane clicking erratically on the metal tiles. The chrono on the wall read 03:20. Or possibly 08… something. The display fuzzed out of focus as he squinted. He'd always been a restless sleeper. Especially when men were dying.

'What the hell are you doing? Are you insane?'

Milein Jaskolic, a medicae attached to the Serranic Peltasts, was tending to an unconscious soldier. The man was bound in burn dressings but for his eyes and nose, the skin there a scrappy red as if badly sunburned. A feed tube wormed into his mouth through the layers of wrapping. Numerous lines connected him to drip bags and bleeping monitors, the luminosity dialled to minimum. Milein herself was outfitted in full biohazard gear, a flexible soft-suit that resembled a partially inflated blue-green waste sack, with a large plastic visor that hung down to her chest. Her face was lit from beneath by a

string of lumen spots.

'You look ridiculous,' said Tull.

'You want ridiculous? Try walking into a contamination ward wearing nothing but a surgical coat. These men are irradiated.'

Tull walked to the small and ill-kept admin desk by the ward entrance, wincing at the splintering pain in his knee. A sleepless night always aggravated the pins in his kneecap. He hooked his cane over a peg meant for surgical coats, picked up a clipboard and, blinking away sleep, began to study the patient logs for the hours since his last round.

'Are you listening?' Milein insisted.

'I assume you know what the penetrative depth of alpha emissions is.'

'I assume you know what a melanoma is.'

'I'm wearing two vests.'

'Tull! Don't be a bloody martyr.'

'A martyr?' Tull scowled, eyebrows lifting as he flipped through the logs. 'These men are martyrs. They had an atomic arsenal dumped on them and four days later here they still are. If being in the same room makes me a hero, then it's a sorry world you and I live in, isn't it?'

Milein shook her head. Her baggy plastic suit didn't move. 'We all do our part. I think the men down there were happier for knowing we were up here waiting for them.'

Muttering under his breath, unconvinced, Tull ran his fingers down Milein's appalling handwritten scrawl. The gloves made it difficult to wield a stylus, but Doctor Jaskolic presented with a classic case of medicae handwriting. 'Colonel Grippe's showing increased pain responses.' He tracked a little further down. 'Wild stab in the dark, but it could be because of the reduction in pain blockers you've authorised.'

'We're rationing the doses. There's a lot of wounded. You of all people should know that.'

'Maybe we can knock them out with amasec like in the old days.'

'Tull…'

'No. Hell with that.' He clicked his fingers and summoned an almsman who had been checking the intravenous lines on the neighbouring bed. Hariban, Tull thought, but the ancillary staff were rotated so regularly it was difficult to keep track. Even when they weren't suited up like genetors for a xenos autopsy. 'Load me a syringe with a quarter-shot of metanephrin.' The almsman nodded and walked to the narcoceutical lockers.

'Metanephrin is a stim,' said Milein.

'Really? We must've gone to the same medicae scholam.'

'Get some sleep, Tull,' she snapped. Tull saw then she was every bit as

exhausted as he was. 'You turn into a real arse when you've not had any in four days.'

'I'm always an arse,' he muttered as Hariban returned with a loaded syringe. The almsman pulled apart the plastek sheath and looked questioningly at Tull.

He made a 'give me' gesture as he unbuttoned the figure-tight sleeves of his violet coat and rolled them up over his forearms. They were coarse with white hair, bruised with old ink, thick with muscle despite everything time had been able to throw at them. Even with all the rediscovered technologies of the Crusade, setting a bone, tying an artery, restarting a heart or, Terra forbid, performing a field amputation of a limb was hard, *real* work. He tightened the rolled cuff under the elbow, bringing out the veins in his wrist, and gestured impatiently for the syringe.

The almsman nodded and did as he was told.

'Damn it,' swore Milein, turning to look the other way.

Tull grunted as the needle slid into his ulnar vein. He depressed the plunger, blinked a few times, then withdrew the needle, pressing his lips to the head of blood that welled up from his wrist. 'Hotter.'

'A normal person would just sleep,'

'I can't, I…' He shook his head, trying to rid of the faces that haunted the edges of his dreams. Sanderson getting his tetani shot. Merret, a drill yard sprain. Julan, headaches. Kirril, a born anatomist; Tull had run him through basic field aid, for all the good it had done him under an atomic bloody strike. Fatigue muted their accusations, but he doubted he would be sleeping a while yet. 'I can't.'

Milcin frowned at him, then walked to the desk, picked something off it, and pinned it none too gently to the breast of his coat.

'Ow,' he said, and looked down at the yellow rad-pin that now stuck from his breast pocket on a slant.

'When it starts to turn black I'm calling for the orderlies.'

Tull grimaced. 'Sorry. And look.' He readjusted the rad-pin so that the skull motif was facing the right way up. 'I'm really not trying to get myself killed.'

'I know.' Her face softened. 'These men are your regiment. I understand. But you're surgeon-general for the entire 413th. Your responsibilities are elsewhere.'

'What do you think I've been doing when I'm not here? Research?'

'Most of these men are going to die,' she pressed. 'There's not a lot that you or I can do for them besides make them comfortable.'

The mummy on the bed behind her groaned, and tried to prop himself up. 'If I were a general, would I get a pillow?'

Milein blanched. Tull growled under his breath, and pushed past the

unprotesting doctor to the man's bedside. Colonel Ibran's dressings distorted as he smiled. Checking over his shoulder to ensure that the almsman had moved on, Tull slipped him a lho from the stash in his breast pocket. Ibran fed the paper roll through his dressings and between his lips.

'Probably best not light it, though,' said Tull, indicating the impregnated wraps. 'Naked flames and all that.'

Ibran's chest rocked lightly, but his body was too exhausted to laugh. 'She's not so bad, you know. She's prettier than you are.'

'You're *supposed* to be unconscious. Our relative prettiness should be moot.'

'What can you do?'

Tull tried not to smile, failed. 'I'll talk to the Chapter Master, see if I can scavenge some more meds from somewhere.'

'It's all right.' He settled back into his cot, sucking on the unlit lho. 'They'll be shipping us back after this, right?'

'Damn right, sir. While you've been enjoying the comforts of Doctor Jaskolic, I've been up half the night filling out your invalid papers.' He patted Ibran's chest. The dressings were spongy, warm with the heat they'd drawn from the colonel's injuries. 'Find a decorative case for your sidearm and pack a dress uniform for the welcome home parade. You'll be catching the Jupiter rise before you know it.'

Ibran smiled as he drifted back to sleep. 'I wonder what my… children… will… look like…'

Tull bowed his head, a burn in his eyes. He patted Ibran's chest again, lightly, lest he wake him. 'It's all right, son. It'll be all right.' He looked away only as cold vapours pinched his tear ducts tight, a decontamination hiss drawing his attention towards the opening door.

The gases parted before an immense figure. His broad chest was draped in a toga praetexta, pure white with a border trim of cobalt blue. A golden laurel wreath lay across one shoulder. Tull supposed that a little radiation posed no hazard to Ulan Cicerus. His features were broad and heavy with the gigantism of his altered kind, the eyes set deep under his thickened brow blue and fair.

They were the eyes of a gene-bred warrior and leader of warriors, but one who, true to the ideals of his creation, had yet to forget why it was he fought or asked others to fight and die beside him. He studied each of the medicae cots in turn, and his transhuman features expressed pain, compassion, grief, enough for every man in their turn. And remorse.

Before assuming the post of surgeon-general, Tull's principal interest had been in psychologia, specifically post-battle trauma, and despite the guilt and pain he had for himself in spades, he found himself fascinated by how the Ultramarine would react to the same. Would he become timid, agonising over

every decision, or would he overcompensate with acts of bravado? Or would his genhanced psychology simply shrug it off, as easily as his physiology would any other kind of wound?

Tull snatched his cane from the peg and limped towards the giant warrior.

'You must've read my mind, sir. I was just about to have someone find you.'

The Ultramarine spread his hands slightly, as if he were at Tull's service rather than the other way around. 'What can I do for you, Tull?'

The proper awe at finding oneself on first-name terms with a lord of the Ultramarines made a goodly imprint on the wall of tiredness about Tull's brain, but couldn't break it down. 'We're running short on pain meds. These men gave their lives to the Crusade. If the best we can offer them is their final hours free of pain, then I think that's what they've earned.'

'I'll see what I can do,' said Cicerus, and as with every word from the Chapter Master's mouth, Tull believed it absolutely.

'How is Amar pulling together?' he asked, and the Ultramarine's jaw visibly clenched at the reminder.

'He drills what forces we have left. I have never seen him so driven.'

Tull shook his head in amazement. The last time he had seen Intep Amar, the Librarian had been so radioactive that the Thousand Sons Apothecary tending him hadn't even dared touch his armour to remove it. That he'd survived the atomic conflagration was a miracle. That he was already on his feet and apparently in fighting condition shattered what little he thought he knew of Space Marine biology.

'We take it as well as we give it,' said Cicerus blackly, with a finality that killed that line of conversation. But it was one Tull would need to have with him sooner or later. Preferably before he led less invincible warriors into battle again. Cicerus turned to regard the man in the bed. 'Colonel Ibran Grippe. Of the Fifth Galilean Mixed Infantry.'

Tull nodded. 'He was fifteen kilometres from ground zero. One of the lucky ones.'

'I am looking for the ranking Army officer,' said Cicerus.

'You won't find him here. Ibran's been invalided out. He's done. The paperwork will be with your staff by now.'

'That is your decision. But you misunderstand me, *lieutenant colonel*.'

Tull stiffened involuntarily. 'Been a while since anybody called me by that title. I forgot I had it.'

Cicerus gave him a sorry look. 'I suspect that you are about to get used to it. You are the senior active officer in the 413th now.'

'Pity on us all.'

Cicerus' eyebrow arched.

Tull sighed, rubbed his eyes. 'Just tired. So now you've found your officer, what do you want with him?'

'You haven't heard?'

'Heard what?'

Cicerus looked over the occupied beds. 'I suppose you would not have.'

'Heard *what*?'

'Reinforcements have arrived, Tull.'

Tull almost laughed with disbelief. 'It's been four days. How could the Twelfth have got here so quickly?'

'It is not the Twelfth.' Cicerus looked more anguished than he already had. 'It is the Iron Hands. Ferrus Manus is here.'

FIVE

The throne was Medusan iron, as hard as ten years of solitude in the bleak shadowlands, black as winter shale. Like all things wrought by the primarch's hand, it was beautiful. A high back of hand-woven metal plaits, fretted arms, thick bars of dark iron wound over and over like serpents, etched with silver scales. The feet were those of a Dreadnought. No ordinary Space Marine (and to Ferrus Manus, all Space Marines were ordinary) could sit in it without appearing absurd, a child in the seat of the Gorgon. There was but one being in the cosmos it could accommodate, and he brooded from its high seat like a god over a flawed creation.

He lifted his gaze, and the Thousand Sons Librarian, Amar, recoiled as though struck. The Librarian was a ghost in a blood-red cloak. His face was blistered, in parts black, one eye milky as if pupil and iris had been burned off under a promethium torch. His mind, however, was a constant, probing menace against Ferrus' brow.

'You were sent here to negotiate the surrender of the Gardinaal, correct?

'Their submission, lord primarch.'

Ferrus ignored the correction. 'I am told your talks lasted less than a day.'

'The Gardinaal had no interest in peace.'

'The initial report of Chapter Master Cicerus says otherwise.' He turned to the Ultramarine.

Unlike many of his brothers, Ferrus had never sought to unite his people or

bring a fractious world to heel. Harsh worlds bred harsh men, and harsh masters harder warriors, hungry for every scrap of praise grudgingly bestowed, wary, always, of provoking his wrath with failure. To his chagrin, Ulan Cicerus did not rise to the provocation.

'In fairness, lord, I never sat at a table with them. Amar did. He reported that their intent was to use negotiations as a ploy to leverage concessions through arcane means. We should take him at his word.'

'Then I shall.'

He was not the reckless bellicose that Dorn held him to be. Remembering how his dour brother had once had the gall to rebuke him, in the company of both their warriors, and on Ferrus' own bridge no less, for some perceived lapse of restraint, filled him with fury as if his brother were here in his chamber with him. He felt his hands expand, the metal heating in response to his trembling anger.

With the mastery of a demi-god that knew well his own mind, he turned his thoughts away from one brother and towards another. Immediately, he felt his humours balance.

They were so different, yet so alike.

The elegant Phoenician and the hideous Gorgon.

Ferrus bore his brother no animosity for coining that particular sobriquet. It fit. Like a glove of liquid steel. Where Fulgrim was contemplative and beatific, he was belligerent and headstrong. Perturabo, whom many that had not been forced to endure his company would have considered a more natural brother, had once asked what he and Fulgrim had to talk about. That was the first and last time that the Iron Warrior had made Ferrus Manus laugh. But he had not given an answer. Ferrus knew too that he had a reputation for being enigmatic, but there was no aspect of his character that had not been moulded perfectly to his nature. He was difficult to like, and he liked his brothers little enough.

With one exception.

To his mind they were more akin than any primarch was to another or the Emperor to his sons. Their differences, so pronounced, were superficial, and it had taken neither being long to recognise what it was they shared. Perfection. Both carried a need for it, strove for it, demanded no less from those bound by blood and love to call them father. Only in their methods did they differ. Where Fulgrim would scale any obstacle to reach the heights beyond, Ferrus would shatter it through raw determination and walk over the rubble of its defiance. The ultimate goal and the conviction to claim it first were the same.

He drew a breath, ice water over boiling iron, and commanded it to cool his mind. Perfection. He would demonstrate to all and beyond any doubt - Ferrus

Manus was the first amongst his brothers. He glared icily at the Ultramarine.

'On retrieving the Librarian and learning of his failure, your immediate response was to deploy the Imperial Army to encircle the capital city of Gardinaal Prime.'

'It was,' said Cicerus. He stood with a straight back, his cobalt-blue armour polished to a high shine and bedecked with the garlands of Ultramar. He stared, unblinking, at the primarch's throne but not, Ferrus noted, at the primarch himself.

'Yours is a lesser Expedition,' Ferrus said. 'But you should have had the manpower for the conquest of a single world. Except that your landing craft came under fire from atmospheric fighters that you had somehow failed to detect or anticipate. Your auxiliaries were left stranded, and in numbers that were inadequate to repel the armoured counter-assault that followed.'

Cicerus said nothing. His gaze appeared to have turned inwards.

Ferrus gripped the arms of his throne to anchor himself to it. He took another deep breath. 'In response to the Gardinaal's offensive, you led a combined force of Ultramarines, Thousand Sons and a demi-legio of the Legio Atarus to drive them back to their walls.' Cicerus still did not respond. Ferrus needed no further impetus to continue 'To which the Gardinaal answered with saturation atomic strikes. Which, *again*, you failed to detect or anticipate.'

The Ultramarine's resolve crumbled under the verbal battery. It took him several seconds to rally the strength to reply. 'Half of the outer habs were levelled in the attack.' So quiet even Ferrus struggled to hear. 'The satellite conurbs will be lethally irradiated for decades to come. There was no way to anticipate a response of that order.'

'No way?' Ferrus surrendered finally to the impulse to rise, heavy rings of mail tumbling from his broad shoulders as he pushed himself from his throne. 'Half a demi-legio of god-machines lost, five hundred thousand Army dead and rotting.' He took one step down from the dais, clenched a fist in a jingle of mail. 'Need I speak to you of your own casualties?' The look on Cicerus' face told him that no reminder was necessary, but subtlety was the brother of negligence. 'Eight hundred and fifty-six dead or incapacitated beyond useful service, three hundred and one with gene-seed lost or too thoroughly irradiated for re-implantation. This is a calamity, Chapter Master, and you dare stand before a primarch to dishonour your dead with excuses.'

'They raised the storm,' said DuCaine, quietly.

Constructed of black stone and glass, the primarch's personal chambers were cold, hostile and austere, but Ferrus had always found the darkness calming. Class cabinets displayed weapons and war trophies and gave off a feeble inner light, like columns of luminescent algae in a sunken cave, striking walls

of hand-cut obsidian with bands of mineral shimmer. The Lord Commander stood in one such watery pool of light, as did Cicerus, Amar, the Army Commander of the 413th and the senior commanders of the Avernii, Morragul, Vurgaan and Sorrgol Clans who, in expediting their departure from Vesta, had earned their places in his council. The reverberations of the warship's vast foundries all ran through this chamber, the warning tremors of a subsurface volcano that logic and technology struggled to hold in a dormant phase Ferrus pressed fingers into the two stabbing pains in his temples and forced himself to sit back down. His eyes shone in the darkness likes bolts of silver.

First among brothers.

They would see it.

'They raised it,' DuCaine said again. 'They used their counter-attack to draw in your strength, and then annihilated it.' He dropped a fist into his waiting palm.

'The only right response to such commitment is admiration,' said Ferrus, without taking his eyes off Cicerus. 'I trust that your forces stand ready for an immediate return to Gardinaal.'

'Lord?'

'I am offering you and your warriors the chance to redeem yourselves, Chapter Master. The haste of our departure from Vesta necessitated that the bulk of my Legion and all of its mortal auxiliaries be left behind. The Tenth shall spearhead the assault, but we lack the numbers required.'

The Ultramarine blinked up at Ferrus' throne, but appeared to have lost the power of speech. Amar interjected on his behalf. 'My lord, the speed of your response is remarkable, but there is no need for such haste. In spite of the setback on Gardinaal Prime, our ships maintain supremacy over the void. The Gardinaal are trapped on their worlds. We will starve them into submission if we must, but it will not come to that. The vagaries of the warp notwithstanding, Lord Guilliman and the full might of the Twelfth are at most two weeks away.'

Ferrus nodded, then turned to glare at DuCaine. 'Ready the Legion.'

DuCaine and the assembled Iron Lords bowed.

'But lord—' Cicerus began.

'I am here now. My brother will arrive to find a broken world.'

The Ultramarine sagged. 'Yes, lord.'

'And what of the Army?'

This Ferrus addressed to the mortal officer standing at Cicerus' back. He was garbed in a tan-coloured dress uniform that had been misbuttoned, as if pulled on in haste. Over his stony-grey crew cut was a peaked cap with a regimental

crest in silver. His padded shoulders were sewn with badges of the 413th Expedition, of Terra, the Jovian satellite Ganymede, and of Ultramar, the rank insignia of a lieutenant colonel in the Imperial Army, and the red helix of the medicae corps. Ferrus frowned.

The soldier stood loosely to attention, hands resting atop one another over the silver-crested head of an officer's cane, face turned down in what Ferrus had taken for awe at his present company. DuCaine emitted a bark of laughter and only then did Ferrus realise that the man's eyes were closed, light snores rippling his lips.

In a crunch of mail, Ferrus relaxed back into his throne and chuckled.

'Here then stands the boldest warrior of the 413th. Clearly I need not fear for the resolve of the Imperial Army.' He brooded a moment, his humour swiftly blackening, like magma exposed to the surface chill. 'Leave me. All of you. Make ready for the onslaught.'

Swiftly and obediently they did so, Cicerus gently rousing the colonel who, with awesome nerve, saluted the primarch and marched after the departing legionaries.

'May I speak freely, lord?'

In keeping with his role as Ferrus' shadow, Akurduana had held his silence until now, saying or doing nothing that could contradict the primarch. He could have been born to be an equerry. Ferrus wondered why Fulgrim had never honoured him with such a position. He waved a hand for the legionary to go on.

'There is an old Terran saying, lord, about cutting off one's nose to spite one's face.'

Ferrus gave a snort, reaching unconsciously to his face. Despite the appearance of liquidity, his fingers were perfectly solid to the touch, and though powerful enough to melt ceramite and crush Titan armour in their grip, they were cool, as though there existed a nanolayer of insulating glass between the primarch and his own hands. Although, of course, they were not his. His face, in contrast to their alien smoothness, had been battered by all that Medusa could level at an infant god who had fallen into that hell on a star. He was weathered and beaten. His lip was cleft. His nose was bent, broken multiple times.

'And if a face was impervious to spite?'

'The Hellene of ancient Terra used to believe that ugliness of the body was a reflection of immorality of the soul.' Akurduana put up a beringed and lightly hennaed hand to his breast, forestalling Ferrus' irate frown. 'Don't think me fool enough to insult the Gorgon in his own chambers, lord. My father named you Gorgon, and you embrace it because I happen to believe that you like it. I

think, if you would indulge me, that the Gorgon does not care one iota what the Hellene believed.'

'And my brother?' asked Ferrus, lowering his hand to his lap, frowning nonetheless. 'It is in the nature of the beautiful to think naught but the best of themselves.'

Akurduana shook his head, smiling as though Ferrus had just said something funny, a lightness to his spirit that Ferrus could neither grasp nor share. 'Fulgrim is a greater being than Socratus or Xenophon, lord.'

Sitting back with a rumbling sigh, Ferrus turned his face upwards. The ceiling shimmered darkly. 'This I will concede.'

'Cicerus suffers, lord. His wounds are not as plain as Amar's, but they are there. And you know already the casualties the Army has taken. Why are you so determined to take this world without Lord Guilliman's assistance?'

For a time, Ferrus ignored the question. He listened to the rumble of the enginarium, felt the voice and spirit of it. He was connected to every nut and bolt and conduit of his great warship, through the ultimate unknowable of his primarch physiology and the imbibed techno-mysticism of the world that fluke, fate, however one descried it, had forever hence made his. Reading his silence as simple reticence, Akurduana walked to the front of the throne and lowered himself onto one knee.

'It is beneficial to express such things.'

'As you do,' Ferrus sneered. 'With your drawings? Your writings? Santar spoke to me of these things.'

The words were harsh, but Akurduana did not let them sting him. Fulgrim, too, had a temper.

The legionary closed his fingers around the grip of the sword scabbarded on his right thigh. He drew a finger's width of steel. It winked in the chamber's light. Ferrus tensed, but the blade came no further.

'Warriors and sages through history have considered swordsmanship an art. In my father's librarium there is a near complete folio of *The Art of War*. Why limit one's pursuit of excellence along arbitrary lines? The stylus. The brush. The mind.' He resheathed his steel. 'I do not even see the distinction. You are aware of the new Order of Remembrancers that the Emperor has instituted? It is His desire not merely to conquer the galaxy but to chronicle its conquest, and the hearts of its conquerors.'

'I suppose you approve of this institution,' Ferrus muttered. Akurduana dipped his forehead, feigned humility. 'I might have mentioned it to the Sigilite before I departed Terra for the last time. But if you will not speak your mind to me, lord, or to Santar, then perhaps you can find another in whom you could confide. One from whom you need fear no judgement.'

Ferrus sighed deeply, and rested his forehead on his knuckles.

'I have heard these rumours. And I have heard others. My father considers this first and most difficult part of his Crusade to be nearing its conclusion. It is said that he plans soon to retire from the forefront and better attend to the construction of his Imperium.'

Akurduana looked up at him, stricken. 'Who says such things, lord?'

'They say that he means to promote one from the fifteen to lead the Great Crusade in his name. Why, even now Fulgrim joins Horus and Jaghatai and the Lion at his side, for reasons that none will share.'

'You think the mantle should be yours?'

'There are many that could bear it,' Ferrus conceded, leaving the obvious extrapolation unsaid - that there were many who could not. Jaghatai was too raw, the Lion too aloof, even to the cold eyes of Ferrus Manus. 'Horus has always been favoured. Sanguinius beloved by all. Neither's candidacy would be rejected out of hand. Fulgrim would wear the Emperor's crown with grace.'

Akurduana smiled, taking the complement personally. 'And Guilliman?'

Ferrus snorted. 'There could be worse choices. But to answer one question, yes, I believe it should be mine. I will have the swift compliance of Gardinaal be my affirmation.'

Akurduana bowed, the wire bands and golden clips that held his long hair in its warrior braid skitting off the obsidian flagstones. 'If that is your goal, lord, then for as long as Second Company is under your command I will spare no effort in making it so. I know that Fulgrim would bend his knee to no other before you.' He looked up. His skin was darker than his primarch father's, his eyes and hair the colouring of a Terra that no longer existed except in the genetics and memory of ancients such as Akurduana. But Ferrus could see the Phoenician's perfection in his face. 'I make this oath of moment to you.'

Accepting the gravity of such a pledge, Ferrus nodded.

He sank back into his throne, his uncanny eyes turning inwards. He found his thoughts being steered towards his last memories of his brother, Horus. Ferrus could no longer even visualise him without seeing the radiance of the Emperor upon him, their father's favoured right hand. He was not the greatest of Ferrus' brothers, but nor was he the least, and he *had* been the first. Ferrus envied his brother those precious years, and he hated that any man, even a primarch, could make Ferrus Manus feel so… mortal.

'I understand that you knew my father,' he said after a time.

'For a brief time,' Akurduana answered. 'As well as any man can.'

'What would he do, were he here?'

'If any of us could answer that question, lord, then we would not need an Emperor.'

Akurduana smiled. Ferrus did not. He seldom did.

SIX

Four days was not enough time for a feat on this scale, but as was their way, the warriors of the Emperor's Children Second Company had excelled.

Flags of Imperial Gardinaal and the Aquila Resplendent preempted the inevitable triumph of the coming days, suspended amidst the clan banners of the Practice Hall in a chequer pattern of red and gold, silver and black. They hung from the ceiling ductwork, pregnant with the hard work of the Chapter serfs and regimental chefs of the 52nd who had set up over the open forges below. Hot plates, tandoors, tagines and huge induction kilns bubbled and spat, obliterating all thought and odour of war with the spice of half a dozen worlds and a hundred culinary traditions. Second Company itself retained the services of an artisanal victualler from the culinary schools of Anatolia much favoured by their captain. The Space Marine sense of taste was intense, and trace scents of paprik and sumac were enough to send Akurduana's aptly named Remembrancer organ on a dizzying meme-spiral through the pepper silos of the Bosporic trench and back.

As with anything not directly related to war, Akurduana possessed little talent for the victualler's craft. That had not kept him from persisting at it long after his stubbornness had driven half of the III Legion to despair. The very fact that the Emperor had not predisposed him with the ability was all the reason Akurduana needed to pursue it. For where was the reward in excelling where one had been designed to excel?

He frowned critically, drawing the thick wax tip of his pencil over the lithographic plate The Mechanicum assayers that had performed the preliminary surveys of Vesta had discovered the limestone formation just below the permafrost layer. Akurduana had immediately been struck by its perfection. A cut and machined plane of the Vesta limestone now rested on the easel before him.

In the raised wax layered atop it, he could see the X Legion commanders who had answered the invitation to the pre-victory feast, looking about in amazement at what had been wrought on their Hall. Elsewhere, larger groups of Emperor's Children drew the Iron Hands that had been incorporated into their squads between the victual stalls and fighting cages. The other figures that made up the scene he had deliberately downplayed, brushes of feeling and motion that were essential to the mood of the piece but only in a collective sense. Thousand Sons. The officers of the two Expeditions' Army regiments. Their faces portrayed awe, shock, powerful emotions that broke Akurduana's heart to recreate, and that would shatter Fulgrim's doubly, for the primarch had a superhuman's capacity for empathy. Akurduana rubbed a tear into the coppery skin of his cheek.

He moved his attention to the crowded area at the very heart of the scene, scratching off a piece of wax under his thumbnail and thoughtfully reapplying it. He hissed out through his teeth in frustration.

He just could not capture Ferrus Manus as he saw him.

The primarch stood a metre above his greatest warriors, no trace of the brooding giant Akurduana had left in his chambers as he circulated among the Legions' warriors. On the surface Ferrus was the most uncomplicated of beings - plainspoken, logical, reasoned - but he was coming to see the increasing layers of opacity. There was hostility, and even outright misdirection, beneath that tempered facade.

Akurduana could respect that. Nothing of worth ever came easily.

He drew back to examine the restored likeness. It was…

It was…

He snarled, crushed the wax pencil to flakes in his fist.

… It was nowhere even close to good enough!

He did not know why he even tried. Snatching up the cloth with which he had intended to wrap the plate for a return to *Pride of the Emperor* and subsequent printing, he made to toss it over the bathetic attempt. It was all he could do not to break it in half under his boot.

'Why not use an imager and save yourself the headache?'

Amadeus DuCaine was as pristine as an antique Thunder Warrior figurine. His ancient armour had been polished until even the black shone with the

captive luminosity of all the stars it had ever basked under. The veil of chainmail that sailed from his shoulder plates had been oiled. The spikes that followed the rear rim of his gorget had been sharpened. His heavy black cloak had been steamed and pressed. The Eye of Horus, etched in platinum into the cheek guard of his tall helm, glinted from under the crook of his arm. Even the steel plate fixed over his missing eye had been pressure cleansed, every last bolt.

Akurduana dropped the silk covering and shrugged the red lacerna cloak from his shoulder. They all had their rituals.

'There is a certain art in imagery, I will acknowledge. But to craft an image rather than simply recreate one, it is…' His face contorted in an agony of frustration. 'It is more than I can achieve.'

'Careful, my friend.' The Lord Commander took Akurduana's jaw in a playful grip. 'You'll give yourself age lines. Before you know it, you'll look like me.'

Akurduana shook off his friend's hand with a snarl, in no mood to be mocked, and massaged his chin. His fury dissipated almost immediately, however, his expression at once turning regretful. 'You Iron Hands claim to be so logical, so tell me, brother, is it logical to assume that a man with a few scars is a better warrior than one without?'

'Medusa's a black pit,' said DuCaine, with feeling. 'No one climbs out of it without some kind of a scar. I don't think they know what to make of a man without.'

'You talk as if Chemos is a glorious Eden.'

'If you can see ten metres and stand straight without being knocked down by the wind then it's better.' DuCaine's brow cragged with additional furrows. 'And you found Fulgrim there waiting for you. That must have brightened it for you somewhat.'

'And on Medusa you found Ferrus. Is that not worth a little dust and bleakness?'

DuCaine grunted. 'I was a half-feral child in the Albian underhives, and even there we'd heard the legends of Sthenelus.' He held a clenched fist to his chest, the old Unification-era salute. 'Disappointment, your name is bloody Medusa.' He rolled his eyes, then frowned. 'You remember how it was on Terra?'

Akurduana nodded.

'It was a smaller Imperium then. Everyone knew everyone, always rubbing shoulders. It didn't matter what Legion's colours you wore. When the plate came off we were all the same. There was none of…' He waved towards the gathering and Akurduana saw what he meant: warriors divided by Legion, by

clan, by culture. 'Of this. We're all a bit more alike than this lot care to admit.'

'You sing for the choristers here.'

DuCaine laughed, boisterously enough to draw the attention of a group of Army officers seated nearby. 'When I start singing you'll know about it.' He banged his fist on his chest-plate a second time. 'Victories to come, and all that.'

In the busy area at the centre of the Hall was a huge fighting cage. Four pillar-like legs of iron-rebarred ferrocrete raised it off the ground. If it had been occupied then its combatants would have been visible from anywhere in the Hall. It looked big enough to host a bout between Dreadnoughts and had bars thick enough to suggest that that was indeed its purpose. Today it was bedecked with the Turkic banderol of Second Company.

'Speaking of which,' said Akurduana. 'I have a toast to deliver.'

'After you, captain.' DuCaine dragged his cloak out of the way with a flourish. Akurduana bowed in mock thanks.

'Lords.' One of the Army officers that had looked their way a moment before called the two legionaries over as they walked past. There were four of them in total, all medicae, drinking from tin mugs under a heat lamp and listening to a tinned recording describing the outline of the perfect war to come.

'If it isn't Tull Riordan,' DuCaine declared. 'And awake too!'

The man winced. 'The primarch wasn't offended, I hope.'

'Not in the least,' said DuCaine. 'I think he rather enjoyed it.'

The other medicae officers gave Riordan enquiring looks, which he quietly stonewalled. Akurduana supposed that a man who could fall asleep in the presence of a primarch could shrug off almost anything.

'I'm here on Lord Amar's orders. I tried to see Cicerus about getting out of it, but…' The mortal sighed. 'He's not left Executor's training grounds since his audience with the primarch. Point is, I've got men aboard *Executor* in pain for want of enough medication to go around, and about a million rad-shots to administer before morning. Amar isn't interested. But I was hoping I could have a word with the primarch about it.'

DuCaine chuckled. 'Oh, he'll love that.'

Riordan looked up at the Iron Hand for a moment, unsure if that counted as permission, then nodded to himself and scooped up his officer's cane. 'All… right?'

The old medicae's limp slowed the passage of the two legionaries to a procession.

Soldiers, menials and warriors alike saluted Akurduana with filled glasses and clenched fists or bowed as he passed. Solomon and Gaius cheered. Paliolinus and Vertanus pumped fists, encouraging some surly Iron Hands

pilot that Akurduana did not recognise to do likewise. Santar glared at him over tightly folded arms. DuCaine acknowledged all, hands outstretched to the crowds to either side of him, exhorting his own legionaries to the spirit of an occasion they did not wholly appreciate or understand. The bars of the great cage rang like an upturned bell to the brazen cries of victories to come, and before it stood the primarch. He was awesome in his full panoply of war and thronged by lesser warriors, the very greatest of whom were but shadows of his mighty stature.

Ferrus' eyes shimmered.

With amusement? Indulgence, as a father might show a child? Or did Akurduana read too much into a mere reflection of the light?

'Welcome,' Ferrus said, a narrow smile on his face, but nothing of the sort anywhere close to those eyes. He looked down to the mortal, Riordan. 'You are adequately rested?' The medicae coughed, suddenly finding himself lost for words. 'Your leg.' Ferrus frowned. 'I had assumed the cane an affectation.'

Riordan looked at his legs as if unable to figure out which one the primarch referred to. 'Shot in the knee, lord. A live-fire exercise on Jove-Sat IV.' He cleared his throat, tightened his grip on the cane. 'Autogun at two metres. It's a wonder I didn't lose it.'

'Why did you never replace it?'

'I made my peace with it.'

'You are a psychologi.'

Riordan blinked, but it was not a question. The primarch would have been able to recite the name and record of every soldier in the 413th Expedition from memory.

'I was. Once.'

Ferrus lowered himself to one knee with a clank of armour, like a giant kneeling before a child. His enormous, dog-toothed shoulder rim was still higher than the regimental crest on Riordan's cap. He looked into the mortal's face, smile fixed and cold, silver eyes always distant. 'What do you imagine to see in my mind, psychologi?'

Riordan's throat hitched, up and down, but he made no sound. Faltering from the primarch's never-blinking gaze, he looked away, coming, as all eyes did sooner or later, to Ferrus' hands.

'Do you know the legend of how I got these hands?' Ferrus raised one and turned it so that it appeared to change colour under the light. 'Of how I slew the silver wyrm, Asirnoth, by plunging its body into the lava sea of Kiraal?'

'I do, lord,' said Riordan, and swallowed the lump in his throat. 'With respect though, I'm not buying it.'

Ferrus frowned, nonplussed, then laughed aloud, eyes sparkling with

genuine pleasure. 'And why is that?'

The medicae lifted his own hands to his face to demonstrate 'The lines. They're too straight. I've treated my share of liquid burns, and in a struggle you'd expect waves, splashes.' He shrugged. 'Unless you drowned the serpent in a puddle…'

'A pity,' said Ferrus, rising. The smile was gone. 'That one was my favourite.'

The calls from the crowd increased in volume. Akurduana managed to tear his attention from the primarch and the mortal as DuCaine emerged bearing a ewer and a long-stemmed glass. The latter he pressed into Akurduana's gauntlet as, with great pomp, he filled it with wine from the former. The scent dizzied his neuroglottis with floral remembrances, his head filled with the din of clapping hands, pounding feet, men shouting in time.

Raising his glass high so as not to be jostled and risk spillage, Akurduana backed onto the first step towards the fighting cage. Then the next. And the next. Until his view was level with that of the primarch himself, his view that of a sea of upturned faces broken occasionally by fighting cages, lumen posts and greasy smoke He held out his glass and the volume diminished in anticipation of his words. *'Hold!'*

Santar emerged from the crowd, with the dulled edge of a training blade raised. He was clad in riveted half-armour that among the Medusans seemed to constitute casual attire, baring for the first time the huge augmusculature of a cybernetic left arm. 'You have shown us how the Third Legion prepares for war. Let me demonstrate how the Iron Tenth spends the eve of battle.'

The Iron Hands roared their approval. The Emperor's Children shouted back good-naturedly. The mortals got lost in the noise.

Akurduana held Santar's bullet stare. There was no malice, there or in his words, but a determination so fierce it could easily have been mistaken for hatred.

'I understand you will be leading my Second Company,' he said. 'And you my First.' Santar practically spat it out.

'My second, Demeter, is a solid officer. He will go far. You will learn a lot from him.' Santar hissed in through his teeth. Akurduana regarded him quizzically.

What had he said?

'You are an opponent worthy of these cages, captain.' Santar managed to command his voice into a growl. 'Face me. Let's see whose traditions hold up to the test.'

Akurduana glanced towards Ferrus. The primarch's expression was typically obscure but he seemed amused by the confrontation. Officers of the Iron Hands, he knew, were encouraged to settle such matters for themselves. He

sighed.

'Very well.'

A space opened around Akurduana as Santar strode towards him, sword raised, only the primarch himself remaining where he was, as if he were somehow part of the bones of the ship and immovable. DuCaine selected a practice sword from one of the wire baskets at the foot of the cage and tossed it into the cleared ring. Catching it neatly in one hand, Akurduana butterflied the weapon through a few static routines to ease his muscles in and find a feel for the blade. Santar gave an appreciative grunt, but didn't move. Akurduana sized him up.

This would be a different fight to that on Vesta. This time the Iron Hand would be the lighter of the two, an unpowered harness of iron and leather in exchange for his Cataphractii plate. And there would be no element of surprise.

Ferrus Manus stepped back, clearing the stage.

'What are you waiting for?'

There was a tsunami roar from the onlookers as Santar stepped in with a sword-thrust to the heart. Akurduana's sword reacted of its own instinct. A kiss of steel, and Santar's jilted blade swept across his shoulder as though it had never wished for a deeper taste.

Akurduana had never had to think about fighting. Even as an adolescent he had embarrassed the old Thunder Warrior tasked with his instruction, Thariel Corinth, each and every time. He had never been beaten, never been so much as grazed. For him, combat had always been as natural as listening to music or watching a sunrise. As effortless and, after a time, as dull.

Santar roared, furious, breaking a prolonged exchange in which Akurduana's attention had clearly been elsewhere with a cleaving stroke across the chest. His bionic left shoulder more than compensated for the lack of powered support, and blunted or not, it was a blow that would have cracked ceramite like an eggshell had it landed. Akurduana felt the vibrato in his breast-plate as the practice sword stroked across it like the bow of a viola, and eased onto his back foot. Then he flicked up the toes of his trailing boot and kicked Santar smartly under the armpit.

The blow knocked the Iron Hand aside, jerked apart blocky metallic fingers, and clattered his blade to the deck. Someone in the first row laughed. Akurduana afforded them a sardonic bow.

As if anything they had just witnessed had been hard.

He heard a bellow and turned back, the air forced from his lungs as Santar's cybernetic shoulder hammered into his gut and drove him to the crowd. They crashed together into one of the ferrocrete bastions upholding the high cage.

Santar drew back his bionic to punch. Akurduana threw out an open palm, guided the Iron Hand's knuckles up, over and through the corner of the hefty pillar in a shower of ferric dust. He kneed the warrior in the gut. Again. Again. Cushioned by girdle muscle and heavy augmetic work, Santar felt nothing, and slammed his forehead into Akurduana's. The back of his head cracked into the fixture. He cried out in pain. Santar's face came away bloody and Akurduana felt a flicker of something he had not taken from a fight in two hundred years.

Pleasure.

He threw his arms around Santar's neck, close enough to avoid another butting head, then pushed back against the pillar with his feet. Santar growled as he was bent back at the waist. Akurduana began to walk backwards up the pillar, Santar still holding him perpendicular as if they were an acrobat and a circus strongman performing a spectacle for the warriors of the combined legions. Santar roared, feeling himself being pushed off balance, and dropped onto Akurduana's arm like the blade of a guillotine. Akurduana's wrist crunched under the Iron Hand's augmetic shoulder, but his hardened bone density spared him anything more serious than a bruise. Both warriors rolled off each other, the shouts of their brothers pounding in their ears.

Santar was on his feet first, only for a scissoring kick through the ankles from Akurduana to land him back on his face. Akurduana swept up his sword, still rolling, and slashed it down onto Santar's wrist as the Iron Hand reached for his.

There was a *tink* of blunted steel touching augmetic iron and suddenly, but for two warriors' breathing, all was silent.

Santar slumped to the deck in surrender. Akurduana held his sword over Santar's wrist, arm trembling from the after-effects of combat hormones, then blinked in overreaction to the drip of something warm, wet and red into his eye.

Gravely, Ferrus Manus raised Akurduana's sword on his finger.

He was powerless to resist.

'At least he bled you,' said Ferrus.

Akurduana touched his eyebrow, and almost laughed at the giddying sight of red on his lacquered gauntlet. The blood on Santar's face had been his.

'A first?' Ferrus asked.

'A first.'

'Small victories, then,' said Ferrus, delivering the eve-of-battle toast with the grim humour of a born conqueror.

'Men have always come to Gardinaal Prime to die, or so I was told. Why should we have considered ourselves so different…?'

- The Remembrances of Akurduana, Vol. CCLXVII,
The Fall of the Lords of Gardinaal

SEVEN

The Xiphon rumbled, its sleek armoured cowling trembling as powering systems drew from the engines as quickly as they could produce. The growl from its nacelles was that of an aroused beast, bones cold, belly empty, thick promethium fumes belching from its whirring fans into the chill artificial dawn.

'War Beast?'

The aircraft's labyrinthine intakes gurgled and spluttered, causing various intermix choke alerts to light up the cockpit dashboard. Moses quickly rejected the name. 'I know. It does not fit.' He patted the dashboard soothingly as servitors and deck clerks wearing muffler sets and void suits drew fuel hoses from the aircraft's tanks. The gargling subsided, but the upset lingered in its spirit.

Waves of thunder filled the flight deck as Primaris-Lightnings and Stormhawk and Storm Talon gunships were launched by squadron, hundreds of aircraft scattered like chaff through the blue-fielded void doors. The Xiphons and their larger sisters, the Wrath Pattern Starfighters, had more delicate fuelling requirements, a combustible combination of a promethium-based fuel for atmosphere flight and an anoxic chemical plasma for operation in the void that should never, ever mix. It took longer. Moses watched the departure of the heavier strike fighters and gunships from his own violently shaking machine with mounting impatience.

'Breathe, brother.'

Moses glanced over the starboard rim of his cockpit to the Xiphon in the neighbouring launch rack. Vertanus waved. He was clad in dark purple armour, unhelmed, but with an attached headset, a vox-bead extended across his mouth. Their wingtips were practically touching, but it would have been impossible even for a Space Marine to have shouted over the shriek of their engines and been heard.

'Fulgrim has always encouraged us to pursue mastery of the weapons of our foes and rivals, that we might surpass them in the use of their chosen arms.' He reached out of his cockpit and massaged the sleek cowling of his machine. *'Paliolinus is not the only one to have checked your record. Three hundred and nine combat kills. Impressive. I have no doubt that you will master our favoured weapon, Moses.'*

Uncertain how to answer, Moses simply didn't, turning instead to look over his shoulder as deck overseers in reflective silver tabards cleared the area around the launch racks. He checked his gauges, then hit the switch to bring the armourglass canopy juddering down over his head. It locked and pressurised with a hiss.

'Lord Commander Cicerus reported a large air defence force of capable atmospheric fighters.' Paliolinus crackled through the dashboard vox. *'But they are not us. We will carve them open with enough to spare to embarrass our Tenth Legion brothers before the watching primarch.'*

'Why do you think we give them a head start?' chuckled Vertanus.

The build-up of current in the mag-slings situated behind the interceptors' launch racks caused the powerful magnetic coils to glow yellow. The air around them would be groaning, but Moses could not hear it. He gave his restraint harness a trial tug, then felt the rapid inversion of forces as the polarity of the magnets switched. The repulsive force slammed into the back of the aircraft, squeezed Moses between it and his own mass' resistance to the sudden acceleration, and fired it down the launch rack towards the bay doors.

There was a blizzard of sidereal static as he passed through the atmospheric coherence field and then the nothing of the void, just the roar of his nacelles and the hiss of his vox scanner.

Taking a deep breath, hearts slowing down, he made the routine checks and corrections for the brief void flight. Myriad systems and subsystems sprayed his subconscious with status runes. He brushed the interface shunt in the back of his neck with his fingers before manually triple-locking the atmosphere engines, establishing secondary environment seals, heat shields and coolant systems.

He looked up from his post-launch routines as his Xiphon tumbled towards

the planet.

Gardinaal Prime.

It was a cold orb, iron-grey and granite. Mountainous imperfections and folds in the surface of the sphere gave rise to fortifications and industrial stacks, every ciliated crease of the anthropocentric world a hab-layer for the domicile of millions. There was no sign of liquid oceans, or of clouds, or of any phenomena at all that had not been yoked to human will. The remains of a pair of moons formed a lightly irradiated asteroid belt in the planet's orbit, greying out the web of orbital graving docks, heavy manufactories and material harvesters that threaded through it. Counterweighted orbital elevators tethered the grid to the planet's artificial crust, running continually back and forth. A sprinkle of lights filled in the emptiness of the planetary dark side. It was as though a geoformer with primitive materials and grand visions had constructed a divine sphere, set it in the orbit of a star at the edge of Imperial space and named it Gardinaal Prime.

Moses thought of the endless, dust-scoured plains of home. Medusa was pitiless, some would say wilfully harsh, but he would sooner live out the remainder of his functional immortality on her sunless deserts than contemplate a day on this world. Shaking off his disquiet, he glanced over his shoulder.

The vastness of the *Fist of Iron* owned the void behind him, filling in for the occluded stars with a constellation of guidelights, communications lasers and coherence fields. Around her dominant bulk, Moses caught glimpses of *Executor* and the other Expedition vessels seeding the stratosphere with aircraft of Legion hue. But space was big, even on orbital scales, and the bulk of the 413th Expedition was spread out, enforcing their blockade of the planet. He had no visual confirmation of the other fighter wings.

He engaged a wide-angle auspex sweep, returning passive signals from millions of aircraft-sized chunks of near-orbital debris and several hundred coded auto-replies from Imperial transponders. The cog-toothed snarl of Iron Hands attack craft, the crisp alpha-numeric returns of Imperial Army Thunderbolt Heavy Fighters and the signature binary of Mechanicum Taghmata Avengers. They had coasted into the atmosphere on forward inertia and were only now lighting engines. Wrath- and Xiphon-pattern fighters were shooting wider, flanking, utilising their void engines to approach the atmosphere from differing angles of attack. Though the machines were not well favoured by the X Legion, when it came to pure void combat there was little more capable and the *Fist of Iron* boasted several squadrons. In addition, two wings flew under the proud noospheric identifiers of the Emperor's Children, more Iron Hands pilots filling out their cockpits.

Moses felt his blood rise as he tallied the returns.

It was going to be one hell of a fight.

Telemetry from the *Fist of Iron's* command and control finally arrived to fill out his basic overlay with hostile returns and Moses saw that Lord Commander Cicerus' report had been accurate. The Gardinaal aeronautica were numerous but not void-capable. They swarmed the troposphere like hornets.

'Hornet?' he asked, looking at his dashboard. He shook his head. No. That was not right either.

'Assume attack formation,' Paliolinus ordered. *'Maintain supra-orbital velocity until we cut into the stratopause, three degrees off the engagement zone.'*

Affirmatives clicked through the vox. *'Two, ready… Three, ready.'*

'I have a connection error in my port lascannon cell,' said Thyro, Four. *'Shoddy Iron Hands maintenance.'*

Moses scowled, but said nothing.

'Do you need to drop back?' Paliolinus asked.

'I only need one.'

Vertanus, Five, sounded ready, then Moses.

Looking up through his canopy screen, he saw the colossal black delta-wing shape of the Skylance gunship *Oden Spear* swoop towards the planet. Its draconic wingspan was flocked by Arvus lighters in Taghmata and Army colours, escorted in by smaller Thunderhawk-pattern gunships and an entire squadron of III Legion Wrath Starfighters.

'What's going on there?' asked Edoran, Three.

Moses' expression remained cold, blood rushing through his ears as the formation angled down, hitting the stratopause like a volley of torpedoes on a warship's voids.

It was the storm.

If you've never had your guts shaken out by a Skylance gunship performing a combat drop, then you'll never know how hard fought Unification really was. That was what DuCaine liked to say. The Legion was slowly replacing its fleet with the upgraded Stormbird, but DuCaine liked to be reminded. And as far as he was concerned, the Imperium never built a meaner, uglier or more indestructible bird than the *Oden Spear*.

Leaving Rab Tannen fussing over the bolts that secured the Land Raider's tracks to the deck and his seventeen veterans harnessed up in their restraints, DuCaine wove towards the forward wheel hatch, occasionally resorting to the overhead grips to keep himself upright. He spun the wheel lock, dragged it

open, and staggered through to the cockpit, pulling it shut behind him.

'A little bumpy, lads,' he muttered.

There were four large seats, two rows of two. A pair of Iron Hands legionaries in flight armour in the pilot's and co-pilot's chairs, each backed up by a plugged-in servitor. They worked to the radium glow of their needle gauges, the prismatic luminance of gem displays, and the front-facing trapezoid of reinforced armourglass, lit by flurries of weapons flash and engine burn. The occasional direct hit or near fly-pass buffeted them, but the cockpit was armoured like a Primaris-grade saviour pod. Heavy bracing rods filled a large portion of the tight space with shock-absorbent plasteel. DuCaine barely felt it.

'The Gardinaal aren't exactly holding open the door for us,' said the co-pilot.

'Inhospitable bastards,' DuCaine growled.

Caius Caphen stood behind the co-pilot's chair, watching the legionary operate his side of the controls with rapt attention. The boy was just like Akurduana. He had to see and touch everything.

'Boy!' DuCaine barked, giving Caphen a guilty start.

'I was just seeing if I could help. Lord.'

'Not enjoying the ride?'

Caphen winced. 'I don't see why we have to try and land in the middle of the battle.'

DuCaine chuckled. The boy was learning some independence. He took a hold of the pilot's chair-back and peered through the forward window. The *Oden Spear* was not unarmed, far from it, but its descent vector made acquiring and retaining targets difficult. Their escorts and the other Imperial fighters whizzed past, like chunks of rock on erratic orbits around a falling asteroid. He saw a squadron of Fire Raptors break formation and drop to conduct ground attacks, drawing off some unwelcome attention.

'Simple. The Gardinaal aren't going to commit their aeronautica to destroying ours, not when ours is superior, but a large landing force they can't ignore. So we draw them out, we raise the damn storm, and we dismantle that layer of their defence in one move.'

An explosion lit the lower-right quadrant of the screen. Close. The pilot broke his facade of perfect calm to flinch from the sudden flash. The blast rocked the cockpit, followed by a pattering of debris.

'What was that?' asked Caphen.

'Perfect Storm,' mumbled the co-pilot.

A Thunderhawk. A good ship, Terran-made. DuCaine swore.

'How many aboard?' Caphen asked.

'Thirty warriors of the Avernii Clan.'

The explosion shrank from the screen as the dying gunship consumed its flammable reserves. Lighter gases rose to disturb the Skylance, jolting them from their thoughts.

'What is that alarm?' said Caphen, pointing.

The co-pilot slapped his hand away and flicked it off. 'Proximity alert.'

'I see it,' said DuCaine.

A lance formation of heavy Gardinaal fighters had broken through the Imperial fighter screen and made it as far as the gunship transports. Make that a half-lance. It had lost an edge cutting through *Perfect Storm*. A chill passed through DuCaine's gut. Not fear, but a full realisation of what he was witnessing. A suicide run. Lascannon-fire chased the Gardinaal in. Sparks ripped one of the heavily armoured dog-fighters apart, but they didn't break, didn't even try to evade.

Oden Spear's point defences came into play, flooding the main viewer with threat locks and distance counters, both diminishing rapidly as its trio of twin-linked heavy bolters filled the air with flak.

As he watched, a heavy fighter peeled off, bolter-fire riddling its undersection, and struck a breaking Wrath. The aircraft's wings disintegrated as they came together, the dismembered fuselage of the Gardinaal fighter ploughing through the Wrath's cockpit, ripping it in half. Another gunship vanished in the ensuing fireball.

'Shields?'

'At strength,' said the co-pilot, voice tense. 'But those fighters are big. I wouldn't—'

'Get us down.' DuCaine squeezed the pilot's chair-back, firmly, as the jagged tip of the half-lance struck towards the viewer. 'Quickly now.'

'I see it,' voxed Vertanus. *'Watch my tail, brother.'*

The lead Gardinaal fighter came apart under Vertanus' lascannon hose, showering the Skylance and its remaining escorts with flaming debris. The III Legion pilot then executed a millimetre-perfect slice through the aircraft's remains while Moses, killing throttle, hung momentarily, pivoting with wind shear to eviscerate the following heavy fighters with his own nose guns.

'Appreciated,' came the relieved transmission.

It sounded like DuCaine's voice, Awe at the lord Commander's recognition filled his thoughts, but he could not think how to respond, He gave himself to his machine.

His subconscious scoured the EM bands for heat locks, pressure waves, data bleed from hostile cogitators. Telemetries and optimised pursuit curves poured through his interface, manifesting in a mental display he perceived as

an ethereal screen intersecting the Xiphon's more conventional control panel. Proximity awareness data occupied at least sixty per cent of his cogitation capacity.

There may have been no clouds on Gardinaal Prime, but it had them now: swollen nimbi of vaporised metal and carved vapour trails, troubled by the staccato bursts of autocannons and las and the exotic particle bursts of the Gardinaal.

His mind parsed the anarchy into sub-melees, dogfights into duels, yet still chaos ruled the skies of Gardinaal.

'Play the ceiling.' Paliolinus' transmission came through fouled by static. *'Increase altitude and alter course, sixteen degrees off north. Draw the Gardinaal to the edge of their envelope.'*

'With me, brother.' Vertanus peeled off in a burn of thrust to engage a quintet of drab metallic atmosphere fighters that were harrying a Storm Talon squadron. Picking off one from the pack, the III Legion pilot set off in pursuit, yo-yoing and rolling.

Moses stuck close to his wing-brother's tail.

The Gardinaal fighters appeared most analogous to the Thunderbolt. Laden with weapons hard points that spat armour-breaking particle beams with the power of a lascannon and the fire rate of a heavy stubber. Heavily armoured, front and back, but with an entirely unconventional engine design that provided a marginal performance boost over the Thunderbolt. It still couldn't touch the agility of a Xiphon, and even if it could, no mortal pilot could pull off the aerobatics that a Space Marine was capable of.

Moses shook off hostile locks as Vertanus skilfully shepherded the Gardinaal into his brackets.

'He's good,' Vertanus voxed. *'They're all good.'*

'They are bred for it.'

'I was hoping for something more supportive. Something like 'you are better'.'

'You have Edoran's vox frequency.'

Vertanus chuckled. *'I'm going to undershoot him. Be ready.'*

Dumping height for velocity, Vertanus' Xiphon nosed down and shot across the enemy fighter's belly. It fell back to offer pursuit, while Moses gunned his engines to come in behind and complete the sandwich manoeuvre. Targeting runes lit up his mindscreen as his various weapons systems chased locks.

'Take him and we'll break out,' voxed Vertanus. *'We've done enough damage for one day.'*

'Affirmative.'

Moses' fingers tensed around the trigger pull on the back of the central stick

that operated his lascannons. It was too crowded for missiles.

Alert to its danger, the Gardinaal dropped into a spiral dive. Moses rolled after it, fleeting of *Oden Spear* and the other landers from beneath a lattice trace of weapons fire and interceptor duels. His altimeter raced as he ran the heavy fighter down. *One thousand metres. Nine hundred. Eight.* A great sweep of overlapping atomic blasts craters came into view. They formed a chain, a panoramic arc that had flattened thousands of hectares of the Gardinaal capitolis and reduced an unimaginable amount more to rockcrete skeletons and shattered glass. *Seven.* Fire blossomed where Marauders and X Legion Fire Raptors performed ground attacks. *Six.* A musical chime announced sequential locks.

A trio of brackets closed over die enemy fighter and turned red. He squeezed the trigger, shredding the heavy fighter from tail to nose with a stream of rapid-cycling lasers.

He followed the chemical-tinted explosion as he began to pull up. 'Purple sun,' he murmured, and felt the Xiphon respond with a jolt. Like Sthenelus. The Medusa star. 'Perfect.' The sense of satisfaction evaporated almost at once. A string of collision-prevention alarms pulled his attention up. Directly up. Another of the quintet of Gardinaal fighters descended towards him and the transports below. No.

Not descending.

More alerts screamed across his neural shunt as the newly baptised *Purple Sun* detected the signature waveforms of a cascade engine overload. He gripped the flight stick and yanked it hard.

It was dropping out of the sky towards the men below.

Like a fifteen-tonne bomb.

With the full ferocity of the Gardinaal's air defence directed at the *Oden Spear* and the Mechanicum super transports conveying Legio Atarus, the smaller workhorse Arvus shuttles of the Imperial Army were the first to make planetfall.

The box-like transports landed in a debris field just inside the densely irradiated crater chain that now encircled the capitolis. Rear hatches dropped in spasms of incendiary charge to disgorge squads of veletarii stormtroopers. They were encased in hardened void armour, helmed and visored, in the ochre and grey of the Fifth Galilean Mixed Infantry, cradling heavy volkite chargers and crunching out from their landers with a graceless, hunchbacked gait.

Lieutenant Colonel Tull Riordan emerged from his boat, hustled out and into cover by his command section, under the rattle of auto-fire from the rad-scorched and windowless hab-towers that rose crookedly around them. He

may have grinned. It was front-line duty he had signed on for after all, and part of him did still miss the thrill.

'Light resistance, sir,' said Calva, a junior strategos, steeply promoted following the near wipe-out of Colonel Grippe's command tercios. 'But it's not going to stay light.'

'You don't say.' His heart was racing from the descent, and it was only now it began to slow that he distinguished the rapid-fire click of the rad-counter strapped to his thigh plating. 'Auspex. Vox. Give me checks.'

'Vox is choppy, but I still have contact with *Fist of Iron*.'

'Auspex is reading up to five hundred metres. After that, it gets glitchy.'

'Who uses auspex anyway?' Tilting his head as far back as the rubberised seals between helmet and cuirass could give him, he watched the pin-wheeling aircraft. Gunships droned low overhead. Missiles whooshed across the sky through fields of auto-tracer. Mobile AA batteries traversed the immense walls of the capitolis on rails, hammering the sky with particle beams, inconsiderate of the Gardinaal fighters engaged in their arcs of fire. It was worse than that. He could see that the Gardinaal were actively using their fighters to lure the Imperials towards the capitolis walls, where they could deploy AA units and mutually assure destruction.

'Most of the Fifth is down, sir,' announced his vox officer. 'Awaiting orders.'

'The primarch's orders were to take the rail access.' Calva consulted a paper map, and then pointed. 'There. And secure it for the Tenth Legion to enter the capitolis.'

'I seem to recall being in the same meeting,' Riordan muttered, straightening out his leg and massaging his game knee through the rigid all-environment cladding.

'I thought you signed off on this plan?'

'Not in so many words. I simply didn't tell the nice primarch to his face what he could do with his plan. I'm sure you understand.'

A few of the older hands chuckled.

Tull lifted magnoculars to his visor to examine the objective that Ferrus Manus, for all his inhuman greatness, seemed to believe that a few hundred demoralised and largely untried mortal troopers could claim. Radiation glitched the view, fouled everything beyond ten-times magnification in static, but he wasn't yet so old that he needed ten-times magnification to make out what the *Fist of Iron's* high strategos had designated Rail Ingress Octavius.

It was a tunnel of adamantium-plated ferrocrete, thirty metres high and fifteen abreast, two sets of wide-gauge rails running through it, flanked outside and in by a quartet of defence towers, striped with fire slits and bristling with turrets. He'd estimate a standing garrison of five hundred per

tower, but the Gardinaal had already demonstrated their ability for packing men in. Eight hundred then. Say three and a half thousand men in all.

'Sir,' said Calva. 'The honour of the regiment has been impugned.'

'I'm—' Tull lowered the magnoculars and turned to the strategos. 'Where do you learn these words?'

'Sir!'

The veletarus that had called out turned back from the capitolis and pointed with the barrel of his charger towards the slagged satellite hives behind them. A dusky grey shuttle wearing the sombre decimal insignia of the Gardinaal militias sat in the centre of a ring of ripple-fractured glass. Its engines were still warm.

'Check it out.'

'Sir.' The veletarus saluted and began rounding up men.

A drone like that from a heavy gunship grew loud enough to drown out their shouts. Tull looked up, saw the hard-angled shape of a Gardinaal heavy fighter dropping steeply out of the sky towards them, and swore.

Moses Trurakk knew that what he was trying to do was impossible; the scream of binaric warnings that radiated outwards from his neocortex with break plots and escape curves was entirely superfluous. He fought *Purple Sun's* urge to break, the motors in his bionic hand whirring as he pushed the flight stick hard against the aircraft's instincts. His wing flaps juddered violently. His tail groaned. The Gardinaal fighter was falling fast on his inside, trailing thick black smoke and fire like a carbonaceous meteor. He gritted his teeth, the flesh of his face flattened to his skull by the force of gees, and leaned his body that way as if it might help. It would not hurt. Even a Xiphon couldn't turn sharply enough to get the Gardinaal in its sights before it hit the landing zone But he forced it to try. Not because he much cared about the thousands of Imperial soldiers in its blast radius, but because the primarch had deployed them for a purpose. And because honour was at stake.

Scanning his controls, weighing the risk of deploying heat-seeker missiles without a lock with allied aircraft so close, he felt the onset of an idea. It was so unorthodox that it could only have come to him from *Purple Sun*. He silently thanked it, experiencing a rarefied moment of communion with its spirit, and then activated vox.

'Five, this is Six.'

'Break off, you can't get it.'

Moses smiled. 'Tell Ferrus Manus that an Iron Hand got this one.'

Locking the stick down with his bionic, he fought the G-force to shift his flesh hand towards engine control. Even now, at the last second, *Purple Sun*

needed convincing, but on the third transfer of override authorities, it accepted his increasingly urgent mash on the controls.

And fired void engines.

The sudden eruption of thrust cracked Moses' head into the canopy shield. He saw the aileron on the opposite wing shake and tear loose. Then the entire wing was engulfed in black smoke and Moses saw nothing but streaming cinders until his nose rammed into the upper armour of the Gardinaal's fuselage.

In a shriek of metal, his nose section disintegrated. His canopy armourglass struck that of the Gardinaal, and for a snapshot of time Moses stared into the dark-tinted visor of a Gardinaal pilot. The mortal wrestled with his controls. The collision had crumpled the Xiphon like a folding chair, but the Gardinaal heavy fighter was every bit as durable as the Thunderbolt on which it was modelled - had it not been in the throes of an engine overload then it might have flown away from the impact none the worse but for a little buckled plating. As it was, *Purple Sun* drove through it, engines white-hot, sputtering angrily where the duplicate fuel lines cross-fed, pushing the heavy fighter from its course like a steam locomotive pushing freight for scrap.

Moses saw men flash by below, With the genhanced perfection of his senses and supplementations, he marked their expressions of amazement at salvation. Alarms walled from every panel, gem lights illuminating the cockpit with vermillion and amber, black smoke hissed through the fracture his head had made in the cockpit, and he was only now aware of the larraman cells clotted to the side of his face.

Those were the least of his troubles.

There was a reason that void drives were for void and atmosphere for atmosphere. There were reasons too that both the Mechanicum and the Legion favoured the Avenger or the Primaris-Lightning in the Xiphon's interceptor role.

The first rumblings of gaseous expansion from the nacelles caused the cockpit to buckle around his seat. More alarms sounded as the underside of the aircraft simply fell away. He struggled to reopen a channel, praying that he was still transmitting.

'Her name is *Purple*—'

If not for the faint tremors of frustration that emanated from its towering form, a mortal observer might have believed that a statue of the tenth primarch in granite and obsidian had been erected in the centre of *Fist of Iron's* command deck. He glared at tactical inloads as they appeared on screens about the deck. The hum of his armour set his teeth on edge,

throbbing just under the ridged skin of his temples. It was all he could do to remain where he stood and keep his hands from *Forgebreaker's* grip. All he desired at that moment was to draw it, to march on the nearest embarkation deck and take his Stormbird to Gardinaal Prime.

And who would dare stop Ferrus Manus?

He took a deep breath. That was what Guilliman, or Dorn, or even Fulgrim would expect of him. He would not give them the satisfaction. A long, deep breath. The nascent headache faded back into his skull. His palms still itched to feel *Forgebreaker's* power, but he could live with that. They were not his hands.

A warleader's place was here.

The command deck was abuzz with activity. Tactical interlocutors and junior fleet strategos hurried around the primarch's orbit, as they carried data dockets from station to station. Ticker-tape machines spat out instruction cards. At underlit sensorium tables, crowds of cartographae operating slide rules and quad-dimensional protractors called out number strings to their colleagues at the strategium cogitators. Adept Xanthus stood within a nexus of trunk cabling, submerged in a holographic bubble of his own making. Manipulators ordered the disparate data streams into a coherent sphere of pure informational binaric, its complexity of an order that surpassed even Ferrus' untaught genius, until the two dozen crimson-robed acolytes could parse it, via a second mess of cabling, through a series of heuristic transformers. Over it all, the hot-blooded counterbalance to Xanthus' calculating logic, Shipmaster Laeric bellowed orders, red-faced.

'Scythe Six is down,' someone reported, reading off the most recently translated inloads. 'The Fifth Galilean are trying to secure the wreckage and recover the pilot's body, but the Gardinaal are fighting hard in that area.'

Ferrus Manus did not grieve for his son. He was aware of the situation and had heard his final transmission. Trurakk's last art had been one of strength in sacrifice to the cause, witnessed by his father and to the shame of all his brothers. What was a father's grief to compare with that?

'The *Oden Spear* has landed, lord.'

Librarian Amar stood a safe distance behind him. His armour was searingly bright under the spotlamps of a full operational alert, glittering as though lapped with rubies. His gauntlets and vambraces were damascened with white gold, as if wired, and the psyk-reactive nanoconductors of his psychic hood were stark gold on iron black. A white cerecloth headdress softened the hard edges of his metal hood, depicting upright felidae and other Prosperean deities and monsters. Despite the three-hundred-and-sixty-degree illumination, or perhaps because of it, there were deep shadows under his

eyes. His dome was bald, his cheeks sunken, and the Apothecaries had told Ferrus that any one of the dozen or so inoperable cancers in his body would almost certainly kill him yet.

Though he would be the last casualty of the Gardinaal.

'Clans Sorrgol, Morragul and Avernii are deploying,' he said, his voice a whisper heard through armoured glass. A grimace of anticipation stretched his deathly pallor. Ferrus suspected that the Librarian would allow his body to perish only once the entirety of the Gardinaal capitolis was glass. Ferrus admired that. 'Clan Vurgaan are already down. They advance on the capitolis ahead of schedule.'

As if answering to the primarch's will, the primary displays called up schemata showing the advance of the Iron Hands Orders.

Already the Avernii Clan formations under Akurduana were catching up to their bitter rivals from Clan Vurgaan. Which was why Ferrus had deployed them to adjacent sections. Let mutual antipathy goad them to feats neither could achieve alone. He was pleased to see that Akurduana had been able to marshal the Avernii Clan's competitive fervour, and that Santar had managed to inculcate the same into the III Legion's Second Company. Both performed to a level approaching his expectations. Whenever one looked to be pulling ahead, the others would up their pace. It was beautiful to watch, and yet doing so infuriated him.

He wanted to be there.

'Relaying secondary objectives now,' said Amar.

Ferrus shifted his statuary repose to nod. 'Release the second wave.'

The Librarian gestured and cogged brackets swirled across the tactical displays like snowflakes before locking over coordinates for drop strike. Grain silos. Water pumps. Distribution centres. Power relays for habitation zones. Enforcement precincts. With each order packet went the personal seal of the Gorgon - that the first to level their objective set would be lauded above all others, and that all who fell short would suffer his enduring rancour.

'Many civilians will suffer or die,' Amar observed. He did not protest too sternly.

'The Emperor desires the conquest of a world with its industry and resources intact. This is how that is done.'

He glowered at the screens as Legion markers poured through the capitolis walls. He would show the Gardinaal the cost of defiance. He would show them all.

EIGHT

Sylvyn Dekka had been here before. The jumble of decaying tenement blocks and wire-coiled transformer spires was black with age, scabbed with industrial residue, cracked and broken under the shelling directed towards adjoining, less valuable capitolis districts. It looked like the inside of a blast kiln. Glass from the worker habs' tiny windows had been blown right across the rail tracks, ankle-deep in places, obscuring the signal markings that should have glowed from the rail-side had there been power. Pinched faces stared out from dull basement-grade caste uniforms, apathetic expressions that only two hundred generations of eugenic husbandry could engender. They clustered in doorways wedged open with coat stands or filing units, around sputtering, crank-driven heat lamps.

It could have been anywhere. Perhaps that was why it looked so familiar. Even before the coming of the Imperium, everywhere had looked like this.

The pacifier corporal that Venn's papers had garnered them as an escort fired a short burst into the air from his semi-automatic baton pistol. Like the polyps that grew on the base of an aquifer, the dull homogeneous bodies shrank into their doorways.

'What was that for?' asked Dekka. The gunshots slipped effortlessly through the cracks in the towers, fading into echoes of the artillery' and air strikes that fell just a few hundred metres in whichever direction one chose.

'They need to remember their place.' said the pacifier to the expired illegal.

But then his pedigree was hardly known for its imagination. 'Are we almost there? I haven't the legs I once did.'

'Almost,' said Venn, staring glassily ahead. Tertiary processing-one-one-three.'

'My first consular posting was near here. Administration-one-one-four.'

Venn nodded without lifting his dead eyes from the rails.

Dekka felt the strangest and most inappropriate of smiles as he looked through the dark, unlit units in what he thought must be the direction of Administration-114. It could have been anywhere. And yet there was a flutter of excitement in the frail bleating of his heart, a spring in his step that had not been there when he had last walked on the Eleven Worlds. There was no power. No door spirit would bar his entry. No state bureaucrat would scan his electro-cue and summon an enforcer. His sneer deepened. Now he had a state bureaucrat and a pacifier of his own. This was how the world looked when all the little rules that had been built to keep it right side up fell away, and he found that he liked it.

Neither of his unlikely companions found fault with his expression. The pacifier had been bred to be oblivious. Venn had been bred to be politic enough to avoid comment,

'Do you require further assistance?' The administrator paused by a signal point a few metres ahead, eyes listless but impatient still as he looked back. Eugenics was far from perfect.

'You will know what I require when I ask for it,' he said, still wearing that stretched grin, and lengthened his stride. He marvelled at how easily it came.

The rails led to a large forecourt, a commuter platform on a circular rostrum surrounded on all sides by huge buildings fronted by huge warehouse doors. Ordinarily the platform would have rotated ferry workers and materiel to the manufactories, but with power cut it was currently set in an awkward position between two sets of tracks. Several well-armed squads of pacifiers were ensconced amongst the benches and barriers, and had bulked up its defences with plasterbags. Deliberately upturned trains had been used to block the other rail routes onto the forecourt, and several additional squads in stab carapace and maximum-suppression gear patrolled the one still open.

The High Lords had realised early on that the Imperials were sparing Gardinaal's industrial districts, and had reorganised their forces accordingly.

The bloated rockcrete dome of the quadrant fission station emerged from behind the jutting wall of the manufactory to the right. A lifeless tangle of transmission coils hung about it like a shroud, high-power spot lumens and heavy tracers decorating the air around its bulk. Pacifier transports rumbled down the adjoining habwalks, and Dekka thought he could hear the patient

growl of something with a deeper throat rolling along beside them. One of the superheavy relic tanks of the war caste, perhaps? Dekka had never seen one. And why would he have? The Gardinaal had not faced a military threat in twenty-five hundred years.

The big warehouse doors were all shuttered tight, with the exception of one, wedged open with a breezeblock to about the width of an armoured man. The spirits were dead. Not even a tickle of challenge in his cheek.

A tremendous leveller, the collapse of civilisation.

'I will go first.'

It felt good to say it.

The processing plant was smaller than he would have judged from outward appearances, cluttered with lifeless servo-lines, clamps and spray hoses. The air was thick, hard to breathe. Dekka put one hand over his mouth and, feeling suddenly dizzy, the other to a static conveyer. The pacifier lit a hand lamp. Even its light felt crowded out by the fog of dusty grey particulates hanging in the air.

'This facility was used to paint the body section of bullet trains prior to assembly.' Venn stifled an awkward giggle, his streamlined psychology possessing no defence whatsoever against the gleeful emanations of Dekka's subconscious.

'It may again,' Dekka answered. His response was ambiguous, his feelings on the matter more so.

'The High Lords know how to win a war,' said the pacifier, with utter conviction.

Dekka was in a position to know that the High Lords had absolutely no idea how to win a war. The Undecimus Breach, when green-skinned invaders from beyond the systems' edge had briefly occupied Gardinaal's outermost world, was the only such encounter on record, from a time when even the most deep-frozen of hybridex warrior-constructs would have been centuries unborn. The Imperium represented an entirely different order of threat.

What would this war be called twenty-five hundred years hence? He smirked in the darkness, and unseen, Venn and the pacifier limply mirrored the expression.

The Fall of the Lords of Gardinaal, perhaps.

'From whom do these orders come?' he hissed to Venn.

'Above.'

A cursory probe of Venn's mind confirmed that he knew nothing more than he was saying. The hierarchy of the state apparatus was less a chain than a grid. Everyone knew the apocryphal tale of the Datum subconsul and the Militarum vice-navarch who, on discovering that each technically outranked

the other, starved to death whilst attempting to establish precedence.

The pacifier gripped his baton pistol tightly. The rattle and boom of the battle for Gardinaal creaked through the ranks of sullen machinery like a careless whisper.

Dekka led the way in.

Following the servo-lines brought him to an assembler station, a hub platform of hydraulic clamps and pressure hoses, surrounded by regulator consoles and the tinted glaze of oversight galleries from which officials could assess their workers' productivity. To Dekka's surprise, the consoles were lit, gem displays glittering in the haze, drawing power from a series of portable generators that trembled and shook as though their driving spirits sought not only to power the station but to mimic it too.

The clamps were engaged. They held something down. Something big.

Dekka scratched down the upturned corners of a smile. 'Someone wake it.'

DuCaine's trigger finger ached. The pinnacle of Imperial genescience and power support to his gauntlet flexors, and the bastard *ached*. The bodies were piled twelve deep, some in featureless black carapace, some not. Even the 'dozer blade on the vanguard Vindicator was having difficulty clearing it, the tank complaining like a suction cleaner over a nail as it forced a way through. The Lord Commander ducked under the armoured housing of his Land Raider transport, itself reduced to a geriatric crawl, as a Gatling beamer lashed down on the armoured column.

He rose stiffly from cover, the massive back-mounted power-pack depleted, his movements sluggish. His bolter chewed up the wall around the slit window, then pulled sharply back as the beamer kicked up again, lancing through the Land Raider's paintwork and into metal, drizzling DuCaine's bowed head with adamantium shavings.

He could smell the lead in the black paint. Solid shot pat-pattered on the hull the other side. Hard bangs of bolter-fire. Slow as his own. Conserving ammunition now.

There were no roads in the capitolis. Too susceptible to the vagaries of individualism or chance. Instead, networks of wide-gauge tracks for bullet trains and the narrower footbridges that ran between the transit substations and the buildings provided the only way of entering the city, condensing the fighting and allowing the Gardinaal to flood the routes with fighters. They weren't much, enforcers and up-armed civilians mostly, but there were millions of them. It was slaughter, repackaged into an endurance exercise. As though the battle plan of the Lords of the Gardinaal was to cripple the Iron Hands' tanks with the flesh and bones of their citizens and to drown the

legionaries in bodies until every bolt-round and joule of power was spent.

Give them their due. It was working.

With a despairing bang, something in the Vindicator's motive plants gave out. Black smoke rose off it like a flag of surrender. DuCaine's Land Raider and the long strung-out line of tanks ground to a halt.

'Damn it!'

'We're never going to make the transit nexus this way.' Rab Tannen shimmied round the rear of the idled Land Raider on his haunches. His armour whined with the effort of movement. His servo-arm hung limp to save power. 'We're already falling behind the other clans. The primarch won't be pleased.'

DuCaine grunted. When was he ever?

'And nor will the clan if we fall short,' Tannen continued.

'This is a damn fool exercise anyway.' Claiming the transit nexus was supposed to hamper the Gardinaal's ability to move their troops, but their troops were already everywhere, and they knew their own city, 'if it were me, I'd have had the entire outer districts carpet-bombed, and then ploughed over what was left with the superheavies we've got parked outside the walls minding the supply shuttles.'

Tannen shrugged. His armour's complaints became increasingly audible. 'The primarch wants the city taken whole.'

DuCaine snorted. But Ferrus Manus got what Ferrus Manus demanded, and it would be an authority higher than a Lord Commander - higher than most right-thinking primarchs if this particular Lord Commander was honest - that would gainsay it. 'I'd leave him a little bit, brother.' Turning down the line of impatiently snarling vehicles crowded with impatiently snarling warriors, he sighed. He'd not been born Clan Sorrgol. In fact, he'd found Medusa's feudal customs positively medieval, but what Ferrus Manus demanded…

'Give me an overview of the area.'

Tannen briefly powered up something he'd deliberately opted to power down and squirted a packet of coded binary towards DuCaine's receivers. The rudimentary systems of his Mk I armour decrypted and assembled it, a map of the city splaying across his visor to overlay with his antiquated battleplate's limited auspectoria.

'There's a branch line. Just on the other side of this building.' As DuCaine looked up, a withering volley of bullets and particle beams drove the Iron Hands back behind their tanks. He scowled up at the building in question from behind his sponson. 'I'm taking an irrational dislike to this building, Tannen.'

The Techmarine's lenses hovered over the damage that DuCaine had managed to inflict on the walls. 'Some kind of loose conglomerate. Low-

grade rockcrete analogue. I think we can take it.'

'Good enough for me.' DuCaine banged on the Land Raider's battered hull and pointed its driver towards the building.

Understanding, the legionary threw his left gear forward and the right into reverse, pivoting the battle-scarred behemoth on the spot until the incoming fire spanked off its sloped glacis. The Land Raider revved its engines and then heaved forward.

Rockcrete was rugged and cheap. Walls made of it could be built high and built thick, but DuCaine's Land Raider was an Achilles-Alpha. It was the most durable vehicle in the armoury of the Legiones Astartes, tougher than most superheavies and almost preternaturally indestructible. It was held in almost mystical awe by the Iron Tenth, its mythic status only enforced by the fact that Ferrus Manus himself would permit no lesser vehicle to bear him to war. No one would ever hear DuCaine say it, but sometimes it was as if the vehicle simply refused to be stopped.

The Land Raider dismissed the rockcrete wall like a sledgehammer would have, plunging through the cataract of dust and rubble. Percussive flashes burned away some of the pall, sponson volkite culverins systematically deflagrating the interior, then there was a slow, sheeting crash as a salvo from the hull-mounted quad launcher brought down the inner walls.

The building noticeably sagged.

'For Clan Sorrgol!' DuCaine rose from cover, silver-inlaid cloak billowing in the Land Raider's dusty wake, and fired a bolt-round into the air. 'For the primarch!'

Weapons flashes lit the murk inside. It wasn't the Land Raider anymore. Its awesome firepower had done all it could without bringing the building down upon their heads.

A torrent of hammer-blow particle beams lashed through the roiling grey, as though a blind and furious god sought to smite the insects at its feet with thunder. A legionary went down as he ran, skidding heavily across the rubble-strewn tiles. Another appeared to dance as the recessed window he used for cover was eviscerated by beam-fire The air was bitty and grey. It pattered on DuCaine's face shield like rain. Debris burst under his boots as he charged through, dropped to his knees and slid the last few metres to thump into the back of the Land Raider. It was waiting for its infantry to catch up. A Rhino climbed the rubbled wall of the breach and ground in after them, its pintle-mounted combi-bolter chattering like a servo-skull with a gift for prophecy.

Wincing, DuCaine flexed gauntlet fingers around the grip of his power axe, then rolled out the seized rotator in his shoulder guard. He looked over at it and saw the black trails across the plate indicative of beamer hits. He hadn't

felt a thing. 'Bloody Gardinaal.' He risked a look up. Some kind of heavy particle cannon had been set up on a tripod on an upper floor that had been transformed into a mezzanine by the collapse of the foyer ceiling. The sound of yelling and the clatter of armoured boots pulled his gaze back down.

A bloc of men in padded grey stab armour and visored helms, wielding urban assault weapons, charged into the foyer behind a wall of heavy plastek shields. More poured in through torn walls, splintered archways and the partially demolished stair that led up to the habitation floors, dozens across and hundreds deep.

'Bloody Gardinaal!'

DuCaine wheezed with his armour as he made it rise. His bolt pistol punched through shields, through visor guards, obliterated human skulls. Tannen knocked down an entire rank with a swing of his servo-arm, then crushed two under one boot and decapitated three with a crimson stroke of his axe Caius Caphen peeled off from DuCaine's flank with a half-dozen old Storm Walkers to meet a second flood of men head on. The III legionary plunged through the remnants of the wall as they came through, his lacquered power armour cloaked in grey, his red lacerna stiff and plastered to his side, like the dusty tabard of an Imperial Knight. The stock of his bolter broke through a helmed head and smote the wall behind. A crack of his elbow near beheaded another. Just by standing amongst them he killed them, a god amongst men crushed to the walls or pushed flailing through the tear in the wall and into a long drop to the floor.

'For the primarch!' DuCaine roared. 'Every last one dies!'

The Gardinaal's position and strategy were sound. They had overwhelming numbers, a confined enemy and a defended position they knew inside and out. But they were no Legiones Astartes, and they had no chance whatsoever.

There was a part of DuCaine that revelled in the slaughter, in his infinite superiority over the fighting men of Gardinaal. There were some who felt the isolation of their altered biologies keenly, the loneliness that only severance from the entirety of mankind could bring, but not the Iron Hands and not DuCaine. He basked in it. As he knew that Ferrus Manus basked in his superiority over *all*.

The Land Raider gave a throaty growl, and in a pop of rubble began to roll forwards once again. DuCaine scraped along behind it, taking pot shots at the levels above as the tank passed underneath.

Gaius Caphen drew in beside him.

Breath rasped from his augmitters, his armour having transitioned from purple to grey and now to black, striped by beamer traces and human gore. He was no longer a man, but some chameleonic avatar of pure war, something

feline and perfect in the way he took position beside DuCaine and added his fire to his Lord Commander's.

'Wading through enemies until none remains is a most unsubtle approach to war, one I would more readily associate with the Legions of Perturabo or Mortarion the Reaper than the Iron Tenth.'

'That so?'

'We can't go on this way, lord. I would find the head and remove it. As Akurduana did to your forces on Vesta.'

'And as the Ultramarines already tried, as I recall.' DuCaine was surprised by the warm sting of paternal pride he felt in being challenged by the young legionary. They'd make an Iron Hand of him yet 'It was in the Afrik, I think, that Akurduana told me that madness was doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. That thing happened to cost a lot of lives, but I always won, which is the reason I kept on doing it. And why Akurduana's always trying to do it differently? He frowned over the bodies and the death, the brute force of a galvanic traction drive half a metre from his ear. That's its own kind of madness, if you ask me.

'But he who's without sin, eh? No, lad. If the Gardinaal have a head then it's buried good and deep in their shoulders right now.'

'If we kill ten thousand for every one of ours then we still lose,' said Caphen. 'The Emperor's Children are better accustomed to counting the cost than you are.'

'Look at you, lad.' DuCaine stopped firing a moment to grasp the roof of the legionary's helmet as if to ruffle his hair. 'All grown up.'

Caphen shook off the hand as the Land Raider bulldozed the outer wall.

Bracing his boot in an articulation frame, the pacifier corporal clambered up onto the raised platform of the assembler line where the Imperial pilot had been restrained. The corporal was muscular and thickset, bred to hold a pacification shield or intimidate a crowd, but he was almost ridiculously small beside the captive Imperial.

His head was as broad as the pacifier's torso. One eye had been replaced with an augmetic as big as a man's fist. An additional set of large and complicated mechanical systems protruded from the back of his head where skull met spine. It looked distinctly uncomfortable. His skin was pale Blood loss perhaps, but Dekka thought it was probably just the way he looked; the warrior's biology showed a remarkable tolerance to wounding and capacity to heal. The injuries from the crash were already beginning to re-knit, and despite having both arms crushed under industrial clamps he somehow managed to look haler even than the hour-old picts Dekka had received from

Central Command.

As the pacifier took up a position by the Imperial's head, Dekka took the ladder to the regulator platform. Pulling out his sleeves, he walked to the overseer's parapet overlooking the assembler, and in the bright under-lighting of gem diodes and flat-lined radium-painted gauges, squinted down.

The pacifier slapped the Imperial across the face. Again. Left. Right. A harsh clap that rang through the emptied manufactory.

Another strike and the prisoner's eye snapped open. He grunted, pulling instinctively on his arms to smack the pacifier down. And then the pain came. Dekka saw the moment. His face went ashen, his eye quivered, throat tensed as if considering the worth of crying out, but then, just as quickly, the moment was gone, the pain crushed. Remarkable.

'Could it really be possible?' he murmured. 'A perfect gene-crafted warrior.' Venn, realising as he was designed to realise that the question was rhetorical, did not answer.

Dekka thought of the testosterone-fuelled hyper-rages of the warrior castes, the emotional deficiencies of the enforcement castes, allelically linked to the desired traits of obedience and dispassion, and, even, the myriad congenital defects that had been deemed acceptable compromises to his own gene-line's mental powers. He peered down as the pacifier withdrew to the shadows at the edge of the platform, hand hovering over his sidearm. The captive stared coldly up.

Remarkable.

'I am sorry about the restraints.' The stare didn't waver. 'And your legs. I am told they had to cut them from you to remove you from the wreckage.'

The pacifier unbuckled the hip holster that held his repression mace, but Dekka urged him to stand down with a thought. He smiled briefly. It felt good, to be powerful again. It was almost worth destroying a world for.

The Imperial watched the pacifier backpedal, then turned his eye to fix on Dekka. 'I will tell you nothing.' His voice was deep with a faintly metallic resonance. Not even a residue of pain.

'I think you will.'

He sneered. 'You mean to torture me?'

'I hope not. As you see, I am an old man, and time is pressing.'

'I am not like you. I do not feel pain as you feel pain.'

'Let us begin with that.'

Spreading his hands along the flaking metal of the parapet, Dekka leaned over, as if it were the weight of his mind that pulled him forwards. Subliminal keys turned in phrenic locks, and with conscious permission his mind opened. His thoughts expanded.

As a glittering energetic plasma he perceived them, violet-hued and electric, unconstrained by ageing biology or arbitrary physics and eager to touch everything, feel everything, know everything. He gathered in his thoughts and focused. Susceptibility to the subtle temptations of the universal other had been bred from his line over thousands of years.

He felt a singularity of purpose as the full weight of his thoughts fell upon the Imperial warrior's mind. They hit an iron wall. Along trembling umbilicals of pure thought he felt his mortal body respond.

Remarkable.

The warrior's mind had been structured, deliberately, one would have to conclude, to be resistant to just this form of incursion, its layered defences hardened further by a startling, superhuman instinct simply to resist.

Lips pursed in concentration, Dekka bade his mind press down.

'Let us begin with that,' he repeated, his voice a purr of sub-hypnotic insinuations. 'What are you?'

Of all the Emperor's Children, Solomon Demeter was one that Gabriel Santar might have been proud to call a friend.

'We can do this, captain.' The sergeant leaned over the parapet of the enforcer fortress to get a better look at their target, unhelmed on account of the baton round that had fractured the lens and made it impossible for him to see with it on. In his dark complexion and the wilful set to his jaw, it wasn't hard to see a kindred spirit. 'We're already well ahead of the other battle groups.' He drew back and turned his dark eyes towards Santar. 'I'll not be shamed in the primarch's eyes by falling off the pace now.'

Santar nodded approvingly. As bitterly as he'd protested this command, with time to reflect he'd come to see it as an opportunity. One that had been given to him and no other. Ferrus' bond with Lord Fulgrim was already legendary, and now he alone of the Iron Tenth had been gifted the chance to share something of that brotherhood.

'Captain?'

'I'm thinking.'

Their target was the enormous rockcrete-dad dome of the fission reactor.

It stood behind a chain-link fence in the centre of a large manufactory zone. That, and its encirclement by a string of shielded AA-towers, accounted for its continued existence now that the skies were firmly under III Legion control. A garrison of infantrymen in grey carapace several thousand strong were in the process of digging in, and in the time it had taken to clear the overlooking building, the compound had been reinforced with heavier units and vehicles, including some kind of armoured walker that looked to stand

somewhere between a Legion Dreadnought and an Imperial Knight.

Its armour was skeletal in design, the pistons that powered it black, its ornamented outer carapace silver-white. Banners bearing morbid symbols of oppression and death fluttered from a crown of poles. Power weapons sputtered stormily in the cryonic mists that its vents and fans generated. With shuddering strides it patrolled the infantry divisions, the lighter-than-air miasma clinging to noses and mouths. The sudden bulging of veins and tensing of muscles, not to mention the occasional tension-induced snap shot, were apparent even from afar.

'Combat drags,' said Demeter distastefully.

'One of their High Lords?'

Demeter nodded, lip curled in disapproval of what he saw.

Of the one hundred and fifty-five legionaries under Santar's command, only sixty were with him now. A handful had taken injuries and been withdrawn to the city limits, but the majority were spread out and engaged throughout the surrounding blocks. It wasn't Santar's way, but he had grudgingly conceded to Akurduana's advice that Demeter might have something to teach him after all.

Ten- and five-man squads stirred up trouble over a kilometre radius of dense urban sprawl. Swordsmen and snipers, alone or in pairs, scoured the habs for high-value targets. It might not have been Santar's way, but something felt very right about it. It seemed to mirror the semi-autonomous structures of the Legion, albeit on a micro scale. And it seemed to be effective. With warriors everywhere, the Gardinaal did not know where to turn, and had not been able to stall his main force as they had others.

And now he was one large fission reactor from a return to the primarch's graces.

'If only there was some way to get in behind them.' Demeter pointed across to the thinner lines of infantry on the opposite side of the compound. The depleted Legions hadn't the manpower to assault the capitolis from all angles simultaneously, and so the Gardinaal knew full well from which direction the hammer would fall. Several Emperor's Children offered grumbling assent.

Santar could not say he was entirely displeased by Second Company not having everything fall their own way for a change. The buildings were too high and the streets too narrow for the jetbikes they so favoured, and the riders had never once ceased complaining about having to fight room to room on foot.

Perhaps they all had something to learn from each other.

'I agree,' he said at last. 'We can do it.'

'Does that mean you have a plan?'

'We go straight up the middle.'

Demeter looked as though he might protest, but then gave a nod. 'Straight up the middle. It could catch on.'

* * *

'What are you?'

At the fifth time of asking the giant answered, not the slightest hitch in his voice to imply he had been asked before or that he divulged anything he did not wish to.

'Legiones Astartes.'

A tingle of excitement ran down Dekka's spine. The back of his skull tingled. 'And what is that?'

'A superhuman being.' The captive stared through the regulator platform, answering by rote from the pages of a dream. 'As distinct from man as steel is from iron. We are the product of surgical, genetic and psychological engineering, developed by the immortal Emperor from the lore of lost ages, distilled from the perfected being of the primarchs.'

Venn leaned in. 'Primarch. That's a word heard often in intercepts.'

'Some kind of rank, one presumes.'

'An august one.'

Dekka nodded his agreement.

'Sirs—'

The pacifier corporal held half an eye on the doors, a look of mild anxiety evident in the visible portion of his face. The sounds of battle were now decidedly encroaching. Every minute or so an explosion rattled the bound machinery, stirring the gritty air like workers' gruel.

Dekka turned the force of his attention back to his captive.

'Tell me about the primarchs.'

The Gardinaal filled the backstreet behind the hab and in numbers. Sheer wall to sheer wall, soldiers in slab jackets with compact rifles flooded it, packed several dozen deep behind a plasterbag barricade cutting the habwalk in two. A pair of tripod-mounted particle shredders provided enfilade. And they were all turned towards the opposite end of the walk to that which DuCaine and the Iron Hands of Clan Sorrgol burst onto, fully engaged with the Ultramarines under Ulan Cicerus who were coming at them from the other direction. Giving the order to gun them down from behind gave DuCaine a moment's pause, but only a moment's.

As the last of the Gardinaal jerked down with mass-reactive craters opening their backs, he saw why it was that cobalt blue and gold littered the habwalk in such numbers.

A goliath of field-hazed adamantium bones and blood-soaked power

weaponry emerged as the last thing standing when the men around it fell away, sheathed in a great bruise of field distortion as bolt-rounds disintegrated against multilayered force fields. The core of the war machine was human, or once had been. A dead face without eyes or mouth stared out from deep within a grilled helm. The rest of the construct, however, was too large to be inhabited by anything human. It towered even over the Ultramarines, half again the size of a Deredeo-pattern Dreadnought, and with three times the firepower.

This, then, was what Caphen would have them hunt. The head. One of the Lords of the Gardinaal.

In a rattle of hydraulics and a squeal of rubber belts, the walker turned its guns towards the Iron Hands, tripod legs smashing the walkway to blocks of rubble. DuCaine shivered as he felt its gaze, as if he had just been singled out by a dead thing. An enraged roar snapped him out of it.

Breaking free of his command squad, Ulan Cicerus slashed at the machine monstrosity's hind leg with his power sword.

In biradial symmetry to its tripod legs, the war machine was similarly possessed of three upper arms, each one heavily weaponised and apparently independent of central coordination. As the Chapter Master's blade hissed towards its knee joint, a blade punched from an underslung sleeve on a trailing arm and speared the Ultramarine through the shoulder. Cicerus howled his pain as his full armoured weight was hooked from the ground by the meat of his arm, cloak trailing under him like a flag from a toppling pole.

'What are you waiting for, an invitation?' DuCaine opened up with his bolt pistol, and bid brothers swiftly backed up its fire with the hauler bangs of bolters.

Shield flares enveloped the morbid machine, but DuCaine could not tell if it had been damaged. Hashing tocsins mounted on a shoulder gantry whooped, carving the deep shadows on the floor of the habwalk with slashes of amber, even as thick black smoke billowed from vents in its armour. In a few seconds the blind cloud had enveloped the construct, the plasterbag stockade and the Ultramarines; even the wail of the tocsins became muted. 'Cease firing!' DuCaine lowered his pistol. 'You don't want to risk hitting the—' A large, flailing shape, cobalt blue and gold, emerged from the blind cloud and flew through the air like a catapult stone towards him.

Swearing loudly, DuCaine ducked behind the Land Raider's sponson armour. The Iron Hands squads dropped out of harm's way and took aim on the projectile, only holding their fire when they saw what it was.

The Chapter Master struck the quad launcher mounted in the Achilles-Alpha's glacis section, crushing one of the launch tubes and splitting the

housing. DuCaine cursed again.

'After it!' someone yelled. Caphen. It was the sort of thing he'd do. 'Keep firing.'

DuCaine squinted into the blind cloud and waved at everyone to stand down. 'It's gone, lad. You'll only get into a firefight with the Ultramarines, and trust me, you don't want that. Go find Cicerus' second. We'll consolidate here, wait for the gas to clear, and bring our vehicles up to the branch line Slow and steady wins the race.'

'Children,' Glassius muttered as the young legionary sprinted off through the Gardinaal's broken stockade to where the XIII Legion tended to their dead.

'We were all young once.'

The Apothecary squatted down beside Cicerus.

'The Ultramarine lay sprawled over the slope of the Land Raider's glacis. His helmet was split from the jaw to the nose. Blood trickled from his mouth and nose to pool in the crack in his gorget. He was still breathing, but with obvious difficulty, great heaving rasps as if the waning force of his lungs were all that kept his ornamented breast-plate from crushing his chest. A great fracture ran up the middle of it. Garlands and rosaries lay over him, tattered and hanging, for all the world as if they had been tossed into the open casket of a hero by passing mourners.

'He will live,' Glassius announced. 'But he will need extraction to the *Fist of Iron* if he is to fight again.'

DuCaine grunted. 'I can't spare the warriors it'd take to carry him back. Move him into the back of the Land Raider and make him comfortable. We'll take him with—'

Cicerus caught his arm by the wrist. DuCaine hissed in surprise.

'I'll be a burden to no one.' The Chapter Master's voice was bubbly and wet, but his grip was adamant. 'I will find my own way back.'

'You won't make it off the front of my tank, lad.'

The Chapter Master emitted a groan that sounded as though it had been made by his muscles tearing as he slid off the slope of the tank and onto his feet. His knees almost buckled, but with the help of the Land Raider behind him, they held. 'You underestimate the resolve of the Thirteenth. I will make it. The Fifth Galilean are still outside the city. Colonel Riordan has unfortunately seen his share of Space Marine biology - I am sure he will be able to bind me sufficiently to return to the fray.'

DuCaine blinked, as though he'd been slapped in the face from a most unexpected quarter. 'A whole regiment? How many men is that?'

'Less than you think.' Cicerus held the crack in his breast-plate in one hand as he looked up to the larger Lord Commander. 'Mortal men fare less well

under atomic attack even than the Legiones Astartes.'

DuCaine would have shoved the Ultramarine back against the tank if he thought he'd have been able to get back up again. Even so it was an effort. 'I'm bleeding warriors here.'

'It is what the Emperor created us to do, so others do not have to.'

'Spare me the rhetoric. I'm not expecting them to lead the damn charge.'

'You are talking about walking wounded, and they're the ones passed fit enough to leave the *Executor*. They are not ready for the front line.'

'They'd better get ready.'

DuCaine was already moving off to find a vox officer. Cicerus dragged himself a step after him, still holding his chest in one hand. 'I understand that you were lord of the Iron Hands once. Would you be so callous now, in your primarch's place?'

DuCaine looked back over his shoulder and shook his head. 'You heard wrong, son. I commanded the Storm Walkers. The Iron Hands will only ever have one master.'

Cicerus appeared to weaken as he spoke. 'Then allow me to give the order. I still command the 413th Expedition. It should come from me.'

An honourable gesture DuCaine dipped his head to it. 'No.' War was where honourable men were sent by the Stormlord-full to die. 'I insist!'

'Do you now?' He paused to reflect. 'Still no. I'll vox Akurduana and have him do it. He's closer. And he's always had a way with the mortals.'

'As I am greater than you, so the primarchs are exponentially greater again than I.' The Imperial stated it matter-of-factly, no hint of boastfulness or exaggeration. They are the leaders of the Great Crusade, crafted from the Emperor's own genetic stock to embody a different facet of his personality and the demands of war. Their powers are unfathomable, rivalling those of the Emperor himself.'

'Is the Emperor here?'

The warrior laughed coldly. 'You would know if he were.'

'And how many primarchs are there?'

'Fifteen. Would you like me to name them?'

Good. He was becoming biddable. 'How many are in the Gardinaal system?'

'One.'

'What is his name?'

'Ferrus Manus.'

Dekka's brow arched. 'Iron Hands. How very… subtle. And what facet of your Emperor or demand of war does he represent?'

No answer.

Dekka increased the pressure on what he believed to be the appropriate regions of the warrior's mind and repeated the question. A minor aneurism in the giant's remaining eye burst, splotching it red, but still he gave no answer. Either his brain was more cunningly engineered than even a high consul of the Gardinaal could comprehend or he genuinely did not know. He suspected the latter. All leaders had their secrets.

A nearby explosion, the closest yet, brought rust down from the ceiling.

'We have to leave.' The pacifier had his baton pistol and repression mace out again, head cocked to listen to the chatter in his comm-bud. 'The plant won't hold out much longer and there's a larger force heading right here from the rail nexus in one-one-two.' He looked up, face wan as though he had just had a gun pointed at his head. 'High Lord Strachaan withdraws to a more secure location and we have orders to pull back to provide escort. With the captive,' Dekka frowned down at the mumbling superhuman.

'What does Ferrus Manus want?'

'To conquer you.'

'Why?'

'He is a conqueror.'

'And yet he negotiated. Why? A ploy?'

'That was not the primarch. That was Ulan Cicerus, Chapter Master of the Ultramarines.'

'Ultramarines?'

'Another Legion, born of another primarch.'

Dekka felt he understood. It did not seem dissimilar from the gene-lines of the Gardinaal caste system. He himself had been coupled with females of similarly desirable attributes and status and had, he presumed, sired many offspring. He felt a slight pang of regret. Odd, that he had not considered the fate of his progeny, the continuance of his gene-line, until now.

'The Emperor desires Gardinaal to be taken intact,' the warrior added unasked, filling the silence. 'He desires your industry, your military, your technology.'

'And Ferrus Manus answers to the Emperor?'

'All men must answer to the Emperor.'

'Sir.'

The pacifier was definitely anxious now, edging towards the rim of the assembler and the release clamps to free the prisoner. Dekka could hear the detachments outside powering up an armoured carrier to bear them away. Half the corporal's men had already left to delay the Imperial attack on the district power plant. He could sense their unease They were losing, and on some level they were not mentally geared to comprehend they knew it.

Dekka nodded and withdrew his mind. The warrior listed in his restraints.

'I never asked your name.'

'Moses,' he breathed. 'Trurakk.' He answered even without Dekka's presence in his brain. His mental pathways were conditioned to do so now.

'We thought we had won, you know,' Dekka said. 'We hadn't believed that the Imperium could be as vast as your emissaries claimed, that it could muster another force as great as that which we destroyed.'

'There are over a thousand Expedition Fleets that I know of. Some are large. Some are small. The Fifty-second is large and but a fraction of it is over Gardinaal, for we were engaged elsewhere.' Dekka did not ask where, or with what. Without the ability to travel beyond the system's edge such information was meaningless. 'The rest are en route, but the full might of Roboute Guilliman's Twelfth will arrive before they do.' He appeared to smile, though it was hard to tell in the dark. 'You never stood a chance.'

'Propaganda and lies,' Venn hissed.

'No. It isn't.' Dekka nodded over to the pacifier corporal. 'Leave him. Let his comrades find him here.'

'But, sir, we have—'

'He has told us all he can. But he might be of some further help.' Venn offered up his arm and this time Dekka allowed himself to be helped. He had a long walk ahead, and his aide wouldn't be much help in that capacity in a minute. Best to make full use of him while he was able. 'Take your units back to High Lord Straschaan as instructed,' he told the pacifier. 'Inform him that Venn and I mean to make contact with the Imperials. I assure you that no blame will fall upon you.' Probably. 'But Ferrus Manus is the one in charge. He is the one we must get to.'

'I would advise against presenting yourself to these Legiones Astartes.' The pacifier sneered down on their captive. 'They are indiscriminate killers.'

'Indeed they are, corporal. But if I might borrow your sidearm for one moment I believe I know how an old man and his wounded young assistant might get one step closer…'

Being brushed off was clearly a new experience for the legendary Captain Akurduana. The brilliantly armoured warrior traipsed after him through tent after tent, each one crowded with screaming medicae, bleeping instruments and clattering trolleys, like a mute guardian from the Somnus Citadel. Or Tull Riordan assumed he did. He didn't exactly have time to look over his shoulder to check for Space Marines. Holding up a hand, he grunted, 'Stop,' just in case, as a motley cavalcade of merciful sisters charged through, lilac habits fluttering, then limped on without breaking stride. A tent flap burst open.

Blood-red of the Jupiter Storms. An almsman with thin-framed spectacles and a look of drained befuddlement flailed through and stumbled towards Tull, which rather settled the Space Marine question, as Akurduana was the sort of thing a man needed to look at twice.

'Treat him for the pain, then find a space for him in the hospicer tent.' Riordan triaged the particulars from what the almsman gabbled at him without, it felt, consciously taking on what he was talking about.

He pointed out the big pavilion, set up amidst twisted rubble, broken glass, buckled shelters, the occasional skeleton and one incongruously upright corner of an atomically scorched twelve-storey structure. It was picketed with parked tanks and boxed kit, men with leaking bandages and loosened fatigues sitting on them, smoking, dicing, as if a spell of medical leave to an atomic wasteland was what dreams were made of.

A splash of red canvas and the almsman vanished.

'Colonel?' said Akurduana.

Tull bit back a curse. 'You're still there? I thought you'd gone back to the front.'

'We still need to talk.'

'Then let's talk.' Even as he said it, he was striking off in a new direction.

Everything shook. Tents quivered. Trolleys rattled. Teeth ached. The pound of artillery was so loud, so incessant, that no one heard it anymore. Medicae addressed one another through pats on the shoulder, weighted looks, shakes of the head.

The air was smoke, a hundred thousand malignant carcinomas booked in for the decades ahead. Portable field generators, like upright heat lamps, generated bubbles of positive pressure to keep the worst of the atmospheric radiation out, but it was in the ground, in their clothes, on their skin. Men brought it with them in their lungs.

Immense spinal structures of melted and partially congealed metal stippled the haze of the outer capitolis like sutures in a world that had turned bad, the seeping abscesses of those parts of the city stubborn enough and flammable enough still to be aflame poisoning it with oranges and yellows. The moribund Titans of the Legio Atarus brooded silently over the wastage, like the legal witnesses of hell. And over the booms of the artillery, as if war was the sort of contest that produced winners, came the wail of shuttles, Rhinos and Chimeras being loaded for the front, mechanised divisions shepherding them away, superheavy divisions ready to go, the war-horns of the Reaver Titan, the screams of the dying and the men and women desperate to save them.

Crusade.

It had been the Legiones Astartes who had first used the word to describe the Emperor's war of reconquest. Imperial Truth may have crushed the faiths that had once shed blood over the battlefields of Antioch, Hattin and Jaffa, but even so it was a word to inspire the secular with the zeal of the righteous. It was a bloody word. Putting the word 'Great' in front didn't automatically make it so, but Tull had always believed in the cause. The suffering was for a reason, even if the unrecorded Space Marine who had coined the term was incapable of understanding what human suffering was.

He ducked under a half-rolled canvas flap and into an open-sided tent filled with bright lights and pain.

The tent was crammed with the injured, concertinaed into gurneys and foldaway beds, medicated to the eyeballs or otherwise mercifully unconscious. One man alone was screaming, with zeal enough for a dozen Crusades.

He was a young-looking man encased in ribbed grey carapace, a horrendous red slash across the belly. A sister was already in the process of hacking through the soldier's straps and webbing, the two muscular corpsmen that had brought him in pinning him to the trolley. Armour plates began to fall away under the precise incisions of the sister's knife, and black-coloured blood oozed through the boy's split belly. A few centimetres of creased, rope-like viscera squeezed through the tear. It stank like a mix of offal and soured milk.

'We'll need dressings, counterseptic pads and plenty of them, needle and thread, forceps, and a set of cochleari to return the intestines.' Tull rolled up his sleeves. An almsman sprayed his tattooed forearms with counterseptic. The boy whimpered as Tull's fingers explored his abdomen. 'And an analgesist if you can find one.' Tull touched the wound itself and brought an explosive scream, just as the almsman disappeared through the flap. 'Or a gag if you can't!' he yelled after. 'You.' He turned to Akurduana and looked up. 'Apply pressure here.'

The legionary held his hand uncertainly over the boy's belly. 'I should really —'

'Quickly now.' Tull hooked his cane over the trolley's handrail. His bare arms were fluffed with counterseptic powder, the long-handled spoon and hook-tipped forceps he had been handed glinting under the overhead lamps. 'I work. You talk.'

'Very well,' Akurduana mumbled, his elaborately worked gauntlet swallowing the wound and most of the boy's midriff besides. The soldier arched and sobbed and struggled, but between the Space Marine and the two burly corpsmen at either end he was going nowhere.

'Good. But a little less. A little less. *There*. Hold it like that.' Akurduana's

face was rapt as Tull eased his cochlearum between the man's torn belly and the metal of the legionary's gauntlet and located the extruded intestine.

'Fascinating.'

'I would've thought you'd be used to this,' said Tull, locating the loop of intestine with the bowl of his spoon.

'This is rather the opposite of that for which I am best known.'

'Ease off now, just a little.' Akurduana did as he was bidden, and almsmen and sisters bearing counterseptic pads swept in to cleanse the wound. 'No sign of that analgesist then?' He sighed. 'Brace yourself, son.' With a sharp levering of the spoon handle, he popped the loose intestine back into the boy's belly. The soldier squealed as if he'd been knifed. The trolley rattled on its wheels. One of the corpsmen grunted.

'He is in pain,' said Akurduana.

'No kidding.'

He glanced up. The legionary was looking over the tent's wounded, eyes trembling with a force of compassion that even Cicerus had never shown for his mortal soldiers. 'So much pain. The Great Crusade was supposed to free mankind from the tyranny of the alien, not to replace it with… this.'

'Hold it. Just a little longer.'

Akurduana frowned down at the boy, his struggles reduced to a twitch and a groan as Tull withdrew his tools. 'I don't recognise the uniform. What regiment is he?'

'He's not one of ours.'

Akurduana looked at him in surprise. 'He's one of theirs?'

'As I understand it this planet will fall in a week or two. So by the time this lad walks out of here he'll be an Imperial citizen. No, no.' He waved his bloody hands theatrically. 'You can thank me later.' He limped about a half-circle to receive a threaded monofilament needle. 'Both hands now. Either side of the wound. Then I'll close him up.'

The legionary spread his hands as if he were about to obey, but then shook his head as though reminding himself of something important. 'I need to return to my Company. And you need to ready yours.'

'It'll only take a couple of minutes.'

'I respect your determination to save lives and ease suffering, but DuCaine is losing men as well. You are a colonel now—'

'Lieutenant colonel.'

'*Lieutenant* colonel. Your place is in the capitolis, as you've been ordered.'

'These men aren't ready. And respectfully, whatever rank long service has earned me. I'm a medicae.'

Akurduana frowned. 'I know you fear no reprimand from Chapter Master

Cicerus, or even from DuCaine and clearly not from me. But sooner or later you will have to answer to Ferrus Manus.'

Tull paused in his work, reliving for a moment the experience of silver eyes on his, and shuddered. Blinking, he switched the needle and thread to his left hand to wriggle out of the sudden tremor in his right. 'A couple of minutes, then we'll talk.'

'Two minutes,' Akurduana agreed.

Tull huffed out and leaned in.

The smell of counterseptic hit his sinuses like a metal rod up each nostril. The boy's gut wound, framed by the lacquered purple and gold of Akurduana's gauntlets, was a thin red line through tissue that was uncannily bloodless and clean. Like the bodies in the war-picts. The tent flapped open again, and Tull glanced up in annoyance, expecting to see the almsman he had sent out making a belated return with his analgesist.

His eyes narrowed.

The almsman had indeed returned, but he was followed in by a soldier in bulky ablative carapace in the slashed ice-blue and grey of the Serranic Peltasts, and a pair of Gardinaal civilians. The first was an old man, at least ninety years old, though the relative ageing effects on divergent human strains and the possibility of rejuvenat therapies made that a lower estimate. The other was younger, a boy of between fifteen and twenty, staring glassily at nothing, presumably with the pain of the shoulder wound he clasped in one hand. Tull assessed it without thinking. A baton round. He'd live.

'I'm busy with people who are actually dying, trooper. So unless one of them is about to be shot…'

The soldier saluted. 'Sir. This gentleman said he has information for the commanding officer. Said it's urgent.'

'Gentleman?' For a Serranic Peltast that was startlingly polite. 'All right, you've got my attention.'

The elder of the two civilians stepped forward.

He walked with a slight curve to his spine. His skin was liver-spotted and lined, his greenish eyes dulled by great age, but as he approached the operating trolley, Tull felt himself overwhelmed by the sensation that this was a man whose every word carried weight. He rubbed idly at an itching sensation in his temple and then, embarrassed by his earlier, casual dismissal, passed his needle to the attending almsman that he might offer his undivided attention now.

'My name is Sylvyn Dekka.' The old man placed a quivering hand to his breast and bowed stiffly. 'High consul of the Gardinaal, representative of its High Lords and the Eleven Worlds.' He straightened. His grey hair was long

and unkempt, tangling with a beard and with silvery tufts from his ears and nose A perfect square section had been cut from his beard. In its place a small black 'X' had been drawn, a red diode at its centre blinking, sensitive to the passage of Tull's gaze towards the man's eyes.

Tull felt his face go slack, something blissful in his mind.

'And we surrender.'

NINE

The Imperial ship was darker than he would have thought. It was cold too, the bitter kind that got into a man's skin, the glacial vastness of its inner spaces swirled with a dark ash that grated on the airways like frozen sand. It reminded Dekka of his secondment to the consulate on Undedmus. Shivering under artificial lights. Breathing artificial air. Waking each work cycle to the darkened neglect of an industrial winter. It took all his energy not to shiver now as he descended the hard metal ramp from the numbing power of the *Oden Spear*. Shivering only worsened the cold. And more than that, he did not want to look weak. It was only rarely desirable, to look weak, when one entered into negotiations, doubly so when one's position *was* weak. And if he had drawn anything from his interrogation of Moses Trurakk, and from his present company, then it was that the Imperials were profoundly intolerant of weakness.

A sonorous metallic boom reverberated through the deck, up the bulkheads, ruffled the flocking banners, and ran up Dekka's spine as five thousand armoured gods made a sharp right turn.

One impenetrable bloc parted along a previously unnoticed central plane to form a corridor, extending like a chasm from the foot of the ramp to the immense engraved arches at the far, far end of the hangar.

All thoughts of shivering fled as he focused instead on resisting the need to gawp.

The High Lords of Gardinaal valued nothing so highly as a military procession. Millions of men in precision blocks, standards fluttering. Then the armoured divisions, huge tanks bedecked with inspirational messages, superheavy tripod walkers so large that their footfalls had stirred the heart and brought power outages along the path of the procession. And then more men. Millions more. And the pride of the Gardinaal, the artillery, the atomic ballistari that had so devastated the first Imperial invaders, hauled by monstrous trucks to the cheers of a dutiful and ever-pliant populace. So vast were they that they could run for days. In fact, an understanding of the logistics involved in conducting a planet-circling procession made the display more impressive rather than less. When one considered that over the duration of the parade those millions upon millions of marching men would have been replaced by millions upon millions more, several times over.

As of that second it had lost all power to impress, crushed under the weight of five thousand armoured gods.

'Close your mouth, consul. Do not betray your years by drooling now.'

Dekka stiffened as High Lord Strachaan tramped down from the gunship.

The High Lord was no less formidable than the Imperials. Indeed, in his reliquary war suit, he was, by any objective measure, greater, but compared to their explicit perfection the exaggerated hydraulics and ossified armour of his tripedal armature seemed… crude. Every edge was hard, every quantum of energy produced sent a shudder through his scaffold, every adornment was functional. The moribund thing inside was smaller. He saw that now. The Imperial Lord Commander, DuCaine, had at first insisted that Strachaan be removed from his suit before being permitted aboard his gunship, until Dekka had patiently explained why that was impossible They had settled instead for impounding his pacifier protection detail on the surface, confiscating his banners, draining his gas canisters and removing his ammunition hoppers.

Or most of them. Their understanding of beamer technology was surprisingly limited.

Tobris Venn trailed shortly behind. His arm was crudely splinted and suspended in a sling. He had made no complaint. Dekka could not say that shooting his aide had not brought some pleasure, but it had been a necessity. Without a convincing wound, it would have been difficult to get close enough to the Imperial medicae station to use his powers. The young clerk turned a little towards High Lord Strachaan and gazed up, eyes almost closed, as if drawing actual energy from the closeness of his august master, oblivious to the twenty Iron Hands that had debarked the gunship immediately after them.

They came fully armed and armoured, unspeaking, as if yet to be informed that the war had been left on Gardinaal Prime, their weapons a shade below

instant kill shots.

The art of diplomacy was alive and well in the Imperium of Man.

'I remind you that this was your idea.' Strachaan's voice resonated harshly from augmitters situated behind a slatted facemask. His decayed human face was high up, shadowed from Dekka's view by the steel bars of his mask, an eyeless husk speckled with silver-grey. Like Dekka, he was old, unimaginably old, and though once counted amongst the highest of lords, even the dead could not endure forever. Today he was deemed expendable.

The parallels aligned too closely for comfort.

'If this fails…'

The threat hung limply between them. Dekka's reward for success was a rescheduled appointment with the bio-reclamation centres on Primus. The High Lord would forgive him for not trembling at the personal consequences of failure.

'The Imperials display a segregated command structure, much like our own orders and ministries.' Dekka nodded subtly to the varied banners and devices as he whispered into Strachaan's thoracic pickups.

The left-hand bloc of warriors and three-quarters of those on the right were hulking brutes in black and silver and naked steel. The lenses of their eyes shone red. Their helms were grilled, like a muzzle on a savage dog. Steam coiled about the seals of their armour. The remainder, though fewer and less overtly threatening, were no less imperious for either trait. Proud warriors encased in purple war-plate with golden highlights and decorative silks. Champions in cobalt blue. Inscrutable giants in red and white, the power of their armoured frames rendered, if not into insignificance, then into second place by the vibrancy of their minds.

'And yet, perversely, the primarch holds absolute authority. You have seen what the Imperium is capable of, my lord. You know that this is our only chance.'

'We will succeed,' said Venn, with the supreme confidence of a child.

Strachaan grumbled. 'We had better.'

A smaller troop of Imperials marched towards them, down the corridor made by the two blocs of warriors. A group of three detached from the rest, a phalanx of brooding hulks in stupendously heavy armour, and strode to the ramp.

'I am Gabriel Santar,' The warrior was pitted like an asteroid, his gaze as intense as an extinction-level event, his armour still carrying the marks of recent fighting, he had his helm clutched underarm, the ceramic straining softly against the pressure of a cold augmetic hand, 'first Captain of the Iron Hands Legion,' he gave the slighter figure to his left a sideways glance, 'and

equerry to Ferrus Manus. As a gesture of good faith I have been recalled from the offensive to command your escort while you are aboard the *Fist of Iron*.' He looked up at Strachaan, lips pursed. His armour was bulkier than that of his companions, and he stood almost level with the High Lord's pectoral shield coils. 'And I will be the personal guarantor of his security.'

The warrior whom Santar had briefly indicated took his cue to step forward. His features were quietly compelling, his armour replete with the forms of winged beasts and strange quadrupeds, spiralling calligraphy and gilt work like nothing that had ever before been seen on the Eleven Worlds. He nodded to Dekka, presented his hand to Strachaan, then laughed as he noted the immense claws and weapons assemblies that terminated the High Lord's three upper limbs.

'Forgive me.'

Santar muttered something under his breath.

'Akurduana,' said the warrior, with an apologetic bow. 'Second Captain of the Emperor's Children Legion.'

'We have met.' Dekka returned the bow.

'Formalities,' Akurduana smiled, stepping back.

All eyes turned to the third figure. Dekka knew him well from the consular transcripts, all that had emerged intact from those disastrous early negotiations with the Imperium. He deepened his bow, conscientiously reining in his mental powers. 'Librarian Amar. It is an honour to meet you, and to express to you my sympathies for the misunderstandings that have led us to where we now stand.'

The Librarian looked slowly down, as if his gaze were a precious implement with the power to drill unhindered through cloth, flesh and bone. It was diamond-sharp, and despite the wards Dekka had set about his mind in preparation for this encounter he winced, and thought he saw Intep's thin lips twitch by way of a smile.

'I will be watching you, warlock. Intently. I would advise you to attempt no repeat of your mind trickery here. Not on this ship. Not in the presence of the primarch.'

'We are not so worldly as you men of the Imperium,' rumbled Strachaan. 'The abilities of the consular caste are routinely employed in negotiations amongst our own, abilities that we assumed you would have employed as well. It was not our intention to deceive. An efficient reunification of the Eleven Worlds of Gardinaal with the Imperium of Terra is all we ever desired.'

Amar frowned distastefully at Dekka. 'And yet you bring another with you.'

'See the brand on his jaw.' The High Lord's pneumatics hissed as his torso

pivoted, a clunkily articulated limb deployed to jab at Dekka's face 'It is a mark of expiry. His value to the Gardinaal has been adjudged to have been exceeded by the burden his deterioration places on the state. His biological components and germ-line cells would already have been reprocessed for the next generation had your blockade of Gardinaal Prime not stranded his ship.'

Dekka forced himself to bow. Amar and Santar watched him suspiciously. Akurduana shrugged and threw Strachaan a reassuring smile. No one bothered to look at Venn.

'Come then,' Santar grunted. 'Ferrus Manus is not known for his patience.'

Santar allowed his gaze to veer neither left nor right, his jaw working so hard to keep his face locked forward that he had to gnaw through a growing cramp. Distorted reflections of armoured figures flowed along the glass-panelled walls apace, breaking into streaks of colour against murals and thick basalt braces, only to re-form and weave after him anew. He grunted, eyes forward. The thump of his boots on the deckplates was reassuringly rhythmic and metallic. His Cataphractii plate purred like a restive beast, in such corollary to his own Medusan spirit that it was uncanny. But his genhanced powers of perception fed him everything. The squeak of the old consul's shoes, the tripartite tattoo of his master's tread. He ground his teeth, eyes forward.

He recognised the battle construct that he and Demeter had faced in the battle for the fission station. He wondered briefly if he could take the Gardinaal on, before concluding reluctantly that he could not. He swallowed his pride. Eyes ahead. If it came to it, it would not be him alone.

After leading the Gardinaal embassy through half a kilometre of the *Fist of Iron's* most breathtaking internal architecture, the procession arrived at a sweeping circular portal. Veneratii Urien and Harik Morn were there to meet them. Santar's honour guard spread out down the corridor.

Morn tilted his head back. 'High Lord Strachaan.' The Gardinaal's suit emitted a hiss by way of a nod. 'You and your deputation may enter.'

'My aide will remain here,' said the grey-haired old consul, Dekka. 'He is low caste. What we have to discuss with your primarch is not for his ears.'

Santar frowned over to the reticent mortal who had not, he noted now, been involved in the opening round of introductions. Sensing his regard, the man turned, looking through him as though unable to focus his eyes. With a sick twisting of his guts, Santar was left with the feeling that he could see right through *him* too, as though he were paper held up against a light.

He gave a derisive snort, more aggressive than he had intended. 'It's your embassy.' He threw a nod to Urien and Morn. Unable to reciprocate in full helms, the two Terminators simply moved aside, stomped about a half-circle

until their backs were to him, and then grasped their side of an immense wheel mechanism in both hands. It was huge, too great for any mere Space Marine to operate alone.

A growl burred through their helm augmitters, power servos whirring with the tremendous effort of forcing that wheel to turn. Once it began to move, however, the trick lay in stopping it. It spun out of the grip of the two Terminators, a blurred ring of silver, until the locking mechanisms clicked and the weight of the portal itself edged it open, The air that escaped was cold as steel, dry as smoke.

Urien and Morn stepped aside as Strachaan marched through the portal, forced into a stoop to contend with the lintel. Santar frowned at that, as if being greater in stature than the primarch were a personal slight. The consul, Dekka, thanked everyone, all smiles and soft words, tried to shake Santar's hand, then shook Akurduana's, before grim-faced Amar shepherded them all through. Urien and Morn heaved the door to after them.

It shut with a heavy slam.

Ferrus Manus did not rise. He willed himself to recline in his iron throne, squeezing and releasing the moulded armrests in time as the emissaries of the Gardinaal were escorted into his chambers. His gaze passed over the lesser mortal, frail and inconsequential, to the lord of the Gardinaal. He took in the detail of the shield coils and hazarded at their operation, the hyper-dense energy-reflective meta-material of his gross armature, assessed the output of his power cores, the effectiveness of his weapons, noted with deep ire at least a dozen that his legionaries had neglected to disable.

His annoyance summoned a drilling pain in his head, and he released his death grip on one armrest in order to grind his knuckles into his brow. He glanced sideways.

The great hammer, *Forgebreaker*, stood on the dais beside his throne, Its ebon haft was upright, inviting. Its head, moulded into the form of an eagle's wings, weighted it to the basalt flagstones. His palm itched. The living metal twisted and swam and keened softly like a nest of wyrms.

The desire to break this thing that had so frustrated his chosen sons parted his fingers, his hand sliding up the armrest to within touching distance of his hammer's grip.

The supplicants halted the prescribed distance from his throne.

Dim illumination spilled from the trophy cabinets, washing their faces with thin grey light and the shadows of blades. They stared up at him. The size of him, the raw, intemperate *might* of him. And then, inevitably, they looked at his hands.

Amar left them to their horror, labouring up the high steps with wheezing breaths to stand by the primarch's side, occupying the position opposite *Forgebreaker*, and then leaned in to whisper in his ear.

The Librarian had nothing of consequence to utter, but Ferrus wanted the Gardinaal to see him whisper. And so he watched as he listened to the Thousand Sons legionary tell him nothing, leaning towards his warhammer as if its counsel might differ. But he did not rise.

The only thing more profoundly superhuman than his temper was his will. And what would please his father and shame his brothers more than the belated surrender of the Gardinaal?

'You returned my son, Trurakk, to my Legion, and convinced Captain Akurduana, whom I am beholden to trust, that I should take you on your word.' The words came slowly at first, like molten steel trickling into a cast, but then with greater urgency and alacrity as they continued to pour from him. 'For that reason alone have I admitted you here. Declare your surrender before me now, for I am Ferrus Manus, primarch of the Tenth Legiones Astartes, the Iron Hands, and my decree is inviolate. Do this for me, and I will not obliterate every last trace of your civilisation from your eleven worlds.'

'To be a fly on that wall,' Akurduana mused.

'A what?' asked Santar.

'He means he's curious to know what they have to say to the primarch,' Morn chuckled.

Santar shot him a poisonous look. 'Presumably 'We surrender.'

'There is little of their empire left to argue over.'

Akurduana glanced towards the black door, apparently doubtful, though his expressions were so mixed and changeable it was difficult to tell.

'What is it?'

'Nothing.' The Terran was the single worst liar Santar had ever met.

'You know something of the primarch's thinking I don't?'

Akurduana's smile was strained. 'Only a confidence I cannot repeat.'

Santar looked from him to Urien and Morn. They looked back, silently disapproving. The III Legion captain had managed to become firmly liked by those that had served under him on Vesta and on Gardinaal. He scowled at them both, then turned back to Akurduana. 'Go.' He waved off down the corridor. 'The primarch appointed you First Captain and equerry for as long as the compliance of Gardinaal required. Well, Gardinaal is compliant. *They've* surrendered. So you can go and… *draw* something.'

Akurduana held his gaze a moment, then bowed coldly, one gauntlet to the brilliant gold of the palatine aquila on his breast-plate. 'It appears you outrank

me, First Captain, so perhaps I will pass by the apothecarion and look in on Ulan Cicerus. And the young hero, Trurakk, too, perhaps. He was, for a brief spell at least, one of mine.'

'Go do that,'

Santar crossed his arms and turned his back, not even listening to the legionary's footsteps as he departed. Eyes forward.

The servile mortal, Venn, however, watched him all the way.

In a grinding hiss of pistons sliding through imperfectly lubricated metal jackets and a gurgle of fluid hydraulics, Strachaan approached the dais. Amar bristled, the blued steel of his sword sliding a finger's width from its scabbard, but Ferrus stilled him with a raised hand. His heart pounded with the expectancy of his triumph. He gripped the arms of his throne fiercely as the lord of the Gardinaal reached the steps.

There, level with the seated primarch on the high dais, the construct stopped. The pale light from the lumen manifold fell across his visor grille and banded his mummified organic features with anaemia and shadow. He was withered and blind, sockets in the sunken flesh where eyes had once been, copper wiring splotched with black spots of corpse rot erupting from his temples to slave into the control systems of his helm.

'What are you?' Ferrus asked.

The Gardinaal's voice emerged from several augmitters positioned across his skeletal scaffold body, several overlapping and imperfectly synchronised voices all speaking at once. 'To permit individuals of the highest caste and most supreme achievement to perish with their flesh bodies would be wasteful. Transferring their consciousness to a machine matrix allows the best of us to rule forever.' The pattern of shadows shifted, the lord's husk of a face creasing into a rictus. 'I have ruled among the High Lords for over thirty-six hundred years.'

Ferrus felt an odd prickling of unease. 'Are you alive, or dead?'

Strachaan's augmitters grizzled in amusement. 'To me, primarch, that question is meaningless.'

The primarch's vision shimmered with a silver haze, the Gardinaal hardening against the background until he shone as though he were clad in precious metal, brighter than the feeble lighting could have permitted alone. Swallowing his aversion to the Gardinaal and the technology that made him live, he held out a hand, the metal writhing. 'Surrender to me.'

The Gardinaal looked back, his dead face inscrutable. 'No.'

Anger hissed through Ferrus' lips.

It had been explained to him that men blinded by rage saw red. Ferrus

Manus was not a man. And when he looked upon the Gardinaal, carrying his sovereign defiance all the way to the foot of his throne, he saw only silver.

An argent flash spread through the haze as one of Strachaan's weapons systems discharged. It appeared to drag as Ferrus focused on it, crawling from the emitter cell in the Gardinaal's shoulder as if blunted by the primarch's gaze. Time slowed to a stop. Fury cooled hardened, cladding Ferrus' heart and muscles in an aching chill He saw the particle lash begin to accelerate. He threw out a hand and caught it. Incandescent sparks sprayed across the dais as the beam exploded in his grip. The liquid metal sizzled angrily, churning, diluting the reddened metal around his fist with fresh silver as the last sparks sputtered through his fingers.

Amar, a primarch's reflexes from receiving a particle lash to the face, blinked in hollow-eyed surprise 'Leave us,' Ferrus hissed, as Strachaan began deploying additional hidden weapons systems. Previously dormant systems were aggressively powering up, shields igniting, cloaking him in a violet aurora, claws, cutters, rotary saws and powered grabbers unfurling from his upper limbs and catching the light. His entire armoured harness swelled as gas-filled cells under arcs of electrical provocation shifted phase to become thick shock-absorbent gels. He continued to grow, wreathed in electrical flame and bristling with blades, until he towered over Ferrus Manus, even enthroned upon his dais. 'Tell DuCaine he has a task to complete.' He reached across, fingers boiling, rushing, closing over the grip of his hammer and hardening. And *then* he rose.

'That was a particle weapon,' said Santar.

'They were supposed to be unarmed,' Urien hissed.

It was impossible to turn swiftly or move deftly in Cataphractii pattern armour, but he and Morn were already grappling with the locking wheel, Santar shouldered in between them to hasten them along with his own strength.

Someone tugged on the skirt of chainmail that hung from his faulds, and he looked sharply down. Tobris Venn stared up at him with yawning great pupils and no emotion.

'I can't allow you to do that, sir.'

Ignoring him, Santar growled down the corridor. The Terminator squad that had escorted them from the embarkation deck had remained on station, and were currently readying weapons and forming up ready to force the portal once it was opened. One of them clomped forwards, hand outstretched, to haul the mortal away.

'I'm sorry, sir, but High Lord Strachaan was most explicit.'

The mortal made a muted gasping sound. At first, Santar thought that the Terminator had broken something - mortals were painfully fragile - but then he saw that his brother was still reaching out for the collar of the man's uniform. The mortal staggered, as though pushed, remaining standing only by tightening his grip on Santar's armour skirt. Santar swore, letting go of the wheel lock, and reached back to deal with the nuisance himself. His gauntlet swallowed the mortal's arm from shoulder to forearm.

The Gardinaal dangled bonelessly from it as he hoisted him a metre off the ground.

'Do you know what—?'

Before he could finish, the mortal vomited a chemical-white froth down Santar's chest plastron.

The First Captain looked over his inflexible gorget rings with a grimace.

Flailing legs slapped his armour as the mortal began to seize, as though Santar's gauntlet were supplying an electric current. The veins began to rise from his skin, changing colour from purple-blue to a thick, foamy white. His eyes glazed over, head jerking back and forth, a foul stench gasping off his breath. Santar screwed up his face. It smelled like…

The mortal's body began to balloon, skin stretching, splitting, bleeding explosive compound, forcing a shuddering smile for perhaps the first time in his existence.

'Most… explicit…'

* * *

The explosion buckled the door down the middle, but didn't break it. It was diorite, patinaed only with the weaker materials of plasteel and obsidian. A neutron beamer could not breach Ferrus' sanctum, not even if the battle tank it was mounted on followed through. The force, however, was enough to crack the frame in which the portal was mounted, cataracts of broken glass cascading to the flagstones as fissures pushed through the walls. It lifted Amar off the ground as he was crumpled, twisted and tom, skidding and rolling back into the chamber like a rag doll in poorly fitting armour.

The lesser of the two Gardinaal, the advisor, Dekka, looked at the Librarian's unconscious form with surprise. 'Not exactly the assassination as planned, but as effective as any.' He turned to Ferrus and, feeling something brush his mind, Ferrus looked sharply his way.

The man backpedalled swiftly until his back was to the wall, his undead lord between himself and the furious primarch.

'We know all about you,' boomed Strachaan. 'We know you, and the High Lords believe you can be beaten. They believe *I* can beat you.'

'I doubt it.' Ferrus dragged his hammer from the top step as he started forward. 'My own father doesn't know me.'

TEN

Ferrus Manus flew at the lord of the Gardinaal with a roar.

Strachaan raised a forelimb to shield his visor grille and *Forgebreaker* hammered into an energy field. Flares, sparks and convulsions of light rippled across the Gardinaal's upper body, the giant warhammer caught in a mesh of conflicting energies as though Ferrus wielded the north pole of one powerful magnet to attack the south of another. Liquid metal ran from his forearms as though repelled by the energies unleashed, swelling his biceps as he strove to force his hammer through the Gardinaal's face. The energy fields bowed before his strength, shivering off spasms of light and heat, illuminating the grimacing mummy beneath.

A hiss of pistons joints. A glint of red light on buzzing metal. Ferrus saw the spinning saw blade as it swung towards his neck, but did not release the pressure on his hammer.

His understanding of materials and their properties was preternatural and untaught, his insight second to none; he let his armour take it.

The saw shrieked against his pauldron, flaying off sparks, while Ferrus shoved through his hammer with all of his might. It was insufficient to break the energy field, but force was force, the universal laws applied, and the war machine was sent tottering back.

Strachaan's three legs quickly rearranged themselves, his torso spinning around gimbal joints between head and neck and hip and groin. Hatches in the

Gardinaal's harness clattered open and shut, particle beams from concealed gun ports firing in sequence to haze the air with small arms fire that broke against Ferrus' armour. The upper half of the Gardinaal was still spinning, cycling through his torso arrays, as he punched out with a power fist. Ferrus batted it aside, smashing the gauntlet to pieces and tearing it from the walker's arm.

Strachaan moaned a curse, the damaged section of limb detaching in a gout of steam. It hit the ground with a clang, a replacement armament unlocking and clicking into place on the truncated limb, even as the third arm swung in.

Ferrus presented the shaft of his hammer to take it, but then stumbled.

The room shifted around him, the light fading, reddening as it bled into the ground. Lava. It flowed in sluggish rivers, bubbles breaking the surface to spew amber fire and sulphurous gases over the shrinking islets of solid rock. Ferrus could feel the heat, the shaking of the volcano beneath him. Glowing pyroclast made patterns in the air, rising up and swirling about in the furnace heat.

The wyrm came at him from nowhere.

He struck it aside with the back of his stave, sending a sword-length chip of scale flying. It reverted to liquid and burned off before it struck the lava flows. A howl of inhuman, greater-than-mortal fury shook the Kiraal, and suddenly the lava sea was all scales, teeth, his iron stave a blur as he countered Asirnoth's rampaging fury…

The blow swept over his guard and hammered into his breast-plate. He blinked, the silver of his vision threaded with a confusion of grey shades as he stumbled back. He shook his head, vision still swimming, and looked down. The Gardinaal's blades had savaged the ceramite. It looked like a mauling, but it was a graze only. He gave vent to a snarl, taking *Forgebreaker* one-handed, slid his hand to the base of the haft and swung long. He missed. The Gardinaal stepped behind his wild lunge and fired a lightning-edged spear point-blank into his gut. No words. No taunts. Pure efficiency. The spear tip cracked his armour, the molecular disruption field widening the breach with a crumping discharge that hurled Ferrus Manus from his feet.

He plunged through a glass cabinet, shattering it, metal raining to the ground as suspension fields failed and treasured relics from Medusa and beyond fell out of the air.

Rogal Dorn stood over him, the rugged yellow of his gauntlet knuckles speckled with silver-red. He glowered down on his brother, his countenance never wavering from one of stem reproach. The warriors of both Legions looked on from the many tiers of the Fist of Iron's command deck with expressions of horror and, though they tried to hide it, fascination. Ferrus had

not intended to lose his temper, but part of him exalted that Dorn had pushed him that far, and that his brother had responded in kind. He spat blood on the baffled flooring of his bridge, and clenched his fist…

The remembered horror of the X and VII Legions stretched to an inflection point, became a wheeze of ageing pistons as Strachaan leant back. *Forgebreaker* burned along the curve of the Gardinaal's chest and Ferrus rose with it. He squeezed his forehead in his free hand, grunting in disorientation, then kicked the Gardinaal in the groin assembly. An explosive counter-force rent the air between his boot and Strachaan with energetic streaks of red.

Ferrus backed warily away. Glass splintered underfoot. A sudden pain stabbed into his head and the chamber swirled, cabinets and murals orbiting him to their destruction as though he were a supermassive black hole. Mountains rose. Mountains fell. The sky wheeled and changed. He was fighting the Elemental of Karaashi through a maze of ice. Facing down the great Yarrk migration at the ford of Jaadan. Battling the mechanised hosts of the mad Iron Father, Stanislas, who had pursued Ferrus mercilessly throughout his childhood, until this day, when he would face the mystic's armada head on and shatter it with his bare hands. *His* hands. He shrugged them off. They were memories only. His memories. His hardest battles.

Drawn by instinct, he risked a sideways glance and noticed the psyker, spread-eagled as though crucified to the far wall where Ferrus had seen him last. The old man was not in the fight, not physically at least, but he stared hard at Ferrus, eyes dark and bulging from his face Ferrus snarled. He saw what was happening.

Fending off Strachaan with his hammer at full stretch, he turned himself around the relic construct, enough for a clear run at the psyker. Strachaan grabbed his arm as he made to spin away, hauled him back and struck him across the jaw. Lightning flashed through his skull. *The rugged yellow of his gauntlet knuckles spattered with silver-red.* He roared and flung an elbow for the Gardinaal's face. The elbow was as high as the alien substance that had colonised his arms went. An even line, as the medicae, Riordan, had rightly observed.

There was a sizzle of boiling solder as the living metal met the construct's power fields, then a brilliant flash as those fields collapsed and Ferrus' elbow crushed the Gardinaal's grille. Anger growled through Strachaan's augmitters. Ferrus bellowed like a rising mountain as he tossed his warhammer aside. It landed with a heavy clang.

'And you say you know me?'

The Gardinaal looked to put some distance between them, hosing the intervening space with particle beams from his torso mounts. Ferrus splayed

his bare hands before him like a shield of molten fury, the rest glancing off his armour.

'Do something!' Strachaan shouted.

Ferrus drew his hands back to form fists, but then staggered as though he had been shot in the eye. His hand went to his head as the ground fell away from him. Clouds boiled in from nowhere as if he were watching the complete life cycle of a world in an eye-blink. The air turned cold, the wind sharp. The ground crumbled, became gravelly and sharp, flat-topped peaks rearing up from a suddenly distant horizon. Ferrus swayed as though the galaxy had caught him unawares with the abrupt termination of its rotation, blinded by a supernova's light. He slumped, breathing in gales, his hand clanging to his thigh.

He was clad in tattered chainmail, strung with a harness of saw-edged Medusan steel. Dents and scratches reflected the light in a million impossible ways, burning, stabbing, glorying, pain and beauty alike, and both falling with equal power on eyes that had never experienced sun or stars. Blood streamed down trembling hands and onto his leg as he pushed down and made himself rise.

The golden warrior strode forward, his pace measured in destinies.

He was the light, a screaming pulsar of blue-white energy that shot into the sky like a spear. He was a beacon around which no clouds could gather, an elegiac that pronounced sovereignty wheresoever it fell. He was the most remarkable being that Ferrus Manus had ever seen or found it possible to imagine, and yet it was no Angel of Peace that walked towards him under the guise of Man.

'His golden armour was fantastically ornamented, but too brilliant to be recalled or described even by a mind such as Ferrus,' as glorious as it had been when the being had first descended from the heavens, despite its punishment at Ferrus' hands. The sword he raised to invite Ferrus to come again blazed with a fire that did not burn. It reminded Ferrus of his hands, only gold where they were silver. Indeed, there was much about this being that was familiar.

Like Ferrus, he was a conqueror, and a part of him mourned the certainty that never again would he face an opponent as mighty.

The being began to speak, but the words that emerged were gibberish sounds. The rattle of caterpillars. The sound molten steel makes as it is poured into a mould. The first time he had heard a bolter fired. Thunder. The war shriek of an eldar banshee. A white noise drawn from his memory to fill that which could never be filled. They were the sounds of a time out of place, and with that realisation the illusion fell away like a window without a frame

and shattered…

No physical memory or psychic charlatanry could mimic the Emperor of Man.

Ferrus understood now. The psyker foraged in his mind for memories of his most testing encounters, seeking an advantage to be used in the present, or perhaps simply to break his will with past failures. With a titanic effort of self-discipline he forced himself into the present.

He was a primarch, the Gorgon of Medusa, foremost of his brothers. The Gardinaal claimed they knew him, but no one knew him. No one, not even Fulgrim, would have known the one thing that Ferrus had always wished for. The one thing, in his pursuit of excellence, that he craved.

To be beaten.

To a god amongst men, triumphs were everyday affairs. But defeats? They were precious. Each carried its own lesson, and the day the Emperor had brought his light to Medusa had been the greatest of his life. He allowed himself to look back into the shattered pieces of the psyker's illusion.

The Emperor stood there before him, sublime, burning sword held out in challenge, and Ferrus knew.

If they were to fight again, the outcome would be different.

He lunged for the simulacra with both hands, blasting it back into his memory and punching through Strachaan's energy field. The psyker was howling in denial, crimson energies whining and sparking, flickering about Ferrus' wrists as though he had plunged his hands into electrified blood. He took hold of Strachaan's rib-like outer frame and roared, his hands flaring to yellow and then white as they responded to his rage. The armour where he gripped blasted to smithereens and knocked the undying construct to the floor.

Torn fluidics spurted, pistons wheezed, fields flickered and failed. Limbs twitched. The Gardinaal gave a great heave of breath, the connections around his eye sockets delivering jolts of panic.

Ferrus stood over him, volcanic with wrath. 'The Gardinaal think they can beat me?' He raised a boot. 'No one can beat me.' And stamped down on Strachaan's face grille with all the power of Medusa unleashed.

Dekka slid down the wall, all he could do to keep the psychic feedback from detonating his brain from within. He groaned, head in his hands. Impossible. Impossible that his attack could be repulsed by a non-psyker, impossible that the greatest warrior of the Gardinaal could be defeated. *Impossible*. And yet it was happening. Groggily, he opened his eyes, his vision pressed in by black rings and filled with a glowing sleet, a psychic afterglow of sorts. Punishment for getting too close and staring too long into something so bright. He saw the

primarch drag his foot from the ruin of High Lord Strachaan's helm, biomechanic vitae spurting over his boot. The relic suit jerked, then a leg, then one claw of a blade, then nothing at all. The status lights dimmed.

An inappropriate smirk grew across the throbbing ache that had become Dekka's face.

It was not funny. Strachaan was dead. Venn was dead. The consulate was rubble. Everyone he had ever known, worked for or with was dead. His descendants were dead or soon to be, his gene-line terminated. He knew it was not funny. And yet he could not help but rejoice at having outlasted them all.

And he was not dead yet.

Ferrus Manus bent to collect his hammer from the wreckage, and Dekka sighed to watch the living metal of his hand lap around the grip of the mighty weapon. And to think that he had once thought Moses Trurakk a giant.

The primarch began to walk towards him, hammer trailing through broken glass and discarded blades. His eyes blazed like molten silver, his face set into a mask of blood and outrage that pinned Dekka in place as potently as a spear through the shoulder.

What right had the Gardinaal ever had to resist such a being? They had been fools, and fools always deserved to lose.

'I should thank you.' His face couldn't support the smile any longer, and it melted from him. 'These last few days have been—'

The hammer smashed him into the wall before he could finish.

When *Forgebreaker* was drawn out of the panel, nothing remained of Sylvyn Dekka but a red stain in the crater of something that had once been beautiful. Ferrus Manus took its haft in both hands and strode towards the buckled door.

His brothers would see who he truly was, and it was exactly what they had all already known. He was the Gorgon.

And the Gorgon knew only one way to make war.

'Armour breaks, buildings burn, rubble is pulverised into dust, only humans can survive - these are not my words, and it is apposite that the name of he who wrote them is now ash. It is the strength of the human frame to emerge from any hell, beaten, but stronger. Flesh, bone, the genic inheritance we bear, that is all that will outlive our works in the end…'

- The Remembrances of Akurduana, Vol. CCLXVII,
The Fall of the Lords of Gardinaal

ELEVEN

News of the attempt against the primarch's life travelled quickly through the *Fist of Iron* and the combined fleet, but details were the first to suffer before the outrage that ensued. Morn was alive. Morn was dead. Morn was in medical stasis awaiting interment in one of the Avernii Clan's Contemptor Dreadnoughts. Veneratii Urien did still live. That much was known. His former captain, Garr of Order Quarii, had, to the relief of all, bellowed the news into the Hall. Santar, if the slow bleed of rumour and hearsay could be believed, clung to life like a Norsii swordsman to his blade It was said he had been the closest to the explosion. Words like 'miracle' and 'machine-touched' were conjuncted to rumours of his survival, though none could agree on where he now was or the gravity of his injuries. Taking all accounts at face value left the First Captain with little more than one arm, a head and a blinding determination not to be outlived by Lord Commander DuCaine. Of the honour guard that had departed the embarkation deck for Ferrus Manus' chambers, some said three were dead, others said that number was closer to ten. But none could agree on whether that included Morn, Urien or Santar.

As for the primarch himself, even rumour and hearsay only went so far.

Thus, the mood amongst his children in the Practice Hall was black. The Iron Hands did not express themselves as eloquently or as often as the Emperor's Children, but they did feel. They needed an outlet. And Akurduana was happy to provide.

He allowed the Avernii Clan veteran's flail to drone past his head.

'There was no warrior more tenacious than Morn.' The veteran's name was Joraan. Akurduana smashed his elbow into the warrior's cheek, *Timur's* curved edge rising counter to turn an axe-blow from his body. 'He survived the Battle of Lox.' The axe-warrior, Feldom, threw a punch with his off-hand that Akurduana deflected from the vambrace of his training leathers. 'For what? To be slain by a subdermal explosive in a corridor of his own ship.' A brief tangling of limbs saw Feldom stumbling away.

A quick follow-up and Akurduana could have finished him, but instead he skipped back as the clawed gauntlet of the third Iron Hands legionary hacked millimetres from his face. It was a lighter, unpowered version of the lightning claw, designed for practice use but plenty lethal enough when employed with more anger than skill.

Akurduana's feet fluttered beneath him as Esoc's partner claw slashed for him, left to right. *Athenia* nudged it on its way, his chanabral sabres dancing apart, whirling together, and spinning off with new partners as they blocked a furious tirade of blows. Nothing came out of Esoc's mouth but grunts and spittle. It was not that the veteran was unskilled - far from it, he was one of the First Order's best - but he was unreasoningly angry. Cutting outwards from the middle with both blades, Akurduana batted aside the Iron Hand's claws and opened up his front. A backward somersault carried him under Joraan's flail and staggered Esoc with an uppercut delivered from the toe of his bare foot.

The veteran grimaced, clicking his jaw side to side. 'Try that in power armour.'

'Superior armour. Superior firepower. Superior numbers. Sometimes I wonder how you Iron Hands would cope with the odds stacked against you.'

'Morn never feared the odds.' Claw, axe and flail flashed together. Akurduana could not tell now which one of them spoke. 'He walked into the fire at Lox and was one of the few to walk out.' Akurduana wove, skipped, danced through blades on pointed toes, landing a blow where one presented, but otherwise content to let his adversaries work. 'He commanded the First Order since. They say it was to be him or Santar to be Clan Captain. But Santar was already Ferrus' equerry. And Morn was Terran.' He eased himself from the melee, isolating Esoc and Joraan with a twirl of his blades, inviting Feldom to power after him, which the axe-warrior duly did, hacking at him with a roar, axe clamped in both hands.

With a deft stab under the stroke, Akurduana snared the axe blade with Athenia's cross guard, pivoted the blade to pop the axe from Feldom's grip, then cracked him over the back of the head with the jewelled pommel. The

legionary stumbled past and into the path of Joraan's flail. He took the hit with a sigh, almost grateful for the release, and slumped to the floor of the cage with a smile on his face.

He dipped his guard slightly as the others closed. His breath was coming with a pleasing rapidity, his skin warm and lightly lathered with sweat. He jerked his head, flicking his warrior braid from his face. 'It was not Morn's fault, what happened. Nor Urien's, nor Santar's. It was not your fault for not being there.'

'No. It was the primarch's fault.'

With evident difficulty, Ulan Cicerus climbed up to the cage. A handful of Iron Hands sullenly polishing sparring blades watched him from the benches. The Ultramarine moved with a hunch that spared his right side, thick tubular bandages emerging from the folds of his toga. His noble features were drained and pale, as if standing was an ordeal for the ages, but he carried his ornate Ultramarian sword and a short spear from the training racks in his hands.

'In his haste to outshine my father, he acted recklessly. Ferrus Manus brought this upon himself. And upon us all.'

'You cannot blame your losses on him,' one of the Iron Hands growled. Joraan.

'Not all of them. Perhaps not even most of them, and I will have to live with my shame. Will he? I do not know. That is what we would call a theoretical. The *practical* is that men are dead who would otherwise have lived if he had waited.'

'He has his reasons,' said Akurduana. To prove himself superior to his brothers. Or at least in his own mind, their equal. But even if Akurduana could break the primarch's confidence, he doubted the Ultramarine would be impressed by such a justification. 'He is a primarch, and above our judgement.'

The Iron Hands rumbled agreement They would curse their primarch as often as laud him, but that was their right. They were his sons.

'That is not how I was taught.' Cicerus angled his spear towards the two Iron Hands, his sword to Akurduana. His injuries were severe, but he was still a Chapter Master of the XIII Legion. 'Will your grief turn its face from mine? You are not the only ones to have lost brothers.'

The Iron Hands drew back, by unspoken consent making room for the Ultramarine to enter. He dipped his head. 'My thanks.' Then hinged with his spear, the four warriors dissolving together like oxygen into blood in a blistering catharsis of melee. Cicerus fought Joraan. Esoc fought Cicerus. Akurduana fought everyone and would have bested them all had he but tried a little. He might not have been a great painter, or an orator or scholar, or

victualler or medicae, but put a sword in his hand and something transformative took hold.

Closer to Fulgrim, he sometimes thought. Further from the Emperor, he would invariably then feel, later, after the weapons were sheathed and his hands were bloody.

Esoc backpedalled furiously, tripping over Feldom's prone body to crash into the bars. The Iron Hand fed his arm through the bars to take a grip on them. He was bruised, but energised for it. He nodded his thanks. Akurduana returned the gesture, and again to those still conscious, but as he extended a hand to help Cicerus hold his balance he froze.

The Hall was silent.

It was testament to Cicerus and the Iron Hands' cumulative abilities that they had preoccupied him sufficiently to miss the cessation of combat in the lower cages. The combatants stood quiet. Those content to grieve alone without the catalyst of arms were deathly still, a hundred pairs of eyes all slaved to one and focused on Akurduana.

The mood when he had begun had been black. Now it was something else. In any other company, he might have called it fearful.

Ferrus Manus watched him from the other side of the bars.

Akurduana could almost feel the chamber being bent around him, the hopes, fears and lives of so many drawn by his raw, neutronic charisma towards brief iridescence and death. He dropped to his knee and bowed.

'My lord primarch. I am overjoyed to—'

'Santar and DuCaine. Then Urien. Then Santar again.' Fulgrim had a temper and had been known to lose it, but Ferrus Manus' wrath was tectonic. 'Now half a squad of my veterans. Did my brother send you purely to humiliate me?'

'My lord, he—'

'Does Fulgrim appreciate your excuses?'

'N-No, lord.'

'Is it not enough for you that the Gardinaal frustrate and deny me at every turn? Do I need Captain Akurduana to take every opportunity to demonstrate the frailty of my Legion as well?'

'Fulgrim loves you as he loves no other. He praises you as no other. Not Horus. Not Sanguinius. You.' Akurduana thumped the stiff leather of his chest-piece, emboldened to go further by his own fluttering of anger. 'And I am his firstborn son.'

'You swore an oath to support me. On your knees. In my own chamber.' He bellowed the last and Akurduana was almost felled before the strident force of the primarch's words. Ferrus' gaze shifted to encompass the Iron Hands

sprawled over the floor of the cage 'Is this what your oath is worth to me?'

Akurduana bowed his head. It was not only Ferrus' *sons* who had felt the cut of their own blade over the compliance of Gardinaal. The primarch was angry. He needed someone to blame.

Akurduana was happy to provide.

'You are as much a father to me as Fulgrim. Tell me what it is you wish from me and if it is mine to give, I will give it.'

Ferrus shook his head as though disappointed. In a rustle of mail, he raised one fulminating metal fist to point towards the heavy-barred dome of the Hall's largest fighting cage. It was huge, held erect by four great columns of reinforced ferrocrete. Akurduana had assumed it was for hosting bouts between Dreadnoughts. A shiver of fear ran through him. Closely shadowed by, and barely distinguishable from, another of excitement.

Now he saw what it was really for.

'I want to see just how good you are.'

'Luc Honsoum.'

Milein Jaskolic read the name aloud from her flipboard as she struck it through.

She felt for a pulse in the neck, then the wrist. Trooper Honsoum's burnt skin was still warm and a little clammy. It reminded her of a damp sponge that had been left to go cold. With a shiver, she made a note - KIA - on the repatriation form.

The Army took care of its own. Tull called it the Covenant Militarum, some spark of enlightenment that had endured through the wars of ancient Europa. As much as the Legions might privately - and some not so privately - wish to push their mortal auxilia until they gave, it was, fortunately, none of their business. The Covenant Militarum gave a regiment's commanding officer ultimate responsibility for the individuals in his regiment. So while superhuman heroes battled for the right to rule the galaxy, the Army took care of its own.

But it wouldn't be the first time that a traumatised soldier had sought demob status amongst the dead.

She nodded to the corpsman, who then wheeled the trolley past, clattering up the ramp of the Arvus lighter. It wore the drab ochre-and-grey camo of the Fifth Galilean Mixed Infantry. Even the whine of its engines was sombre.

She sighed and flipped to the next page.

No one waited in line with more patience than the dead.

Dozens of them surrounded the waiting Arvus on trolleys, pushed by corpsmen in an assortment of unwashed regimental fatigues. If there was a

uniform then it was the sombre expression they wore. A mixture of sorrow and boredom. Milein shook her head. Tull had a way with the dead, a black camaraderie. He would tell them jokes, sit up late in the mortuary telling stories, as if every one were an old friend, that they might wake as if from a coma if only they had a familiar voice to grab hold of. She smiled sadly. Tull wasn't nearly as thick-skinned as he made out. She wished he was here now for this. Or any of the medicae corps from the 413th. But she was the only senior left that hadn't been deployed to the planet. She supposed she should be grateful, and by Terra was she grateful, but she very much preferred her patients alive.

'Samuel Gorse.' She read from the next form as the corpsman clattered back down the ramp with an empty trolley. As if they had just colluded in a magic trick. 'Eric Steele.' In, out. In, out. 'Karl Jarro.' More names. Like birth and death, sped up. Her stylus scratched on paper. 'Ibran Grippe.'

She lowered her flipboard and smiled. The colonel beamed up at her with the disarming honesty of a man who had come to terms with the fact that his days were numbered. In double figures if he was extraordinarily lucky.

'This is it then,' he said.

Ibran sat up on his trolley, dressed in his formals by one of the merciful sisters, but with a foil blanket still draped over his legs. The bandages had been unwound from his face. His skin looked as though it were just badly sunburned, a few pioneer melanomas freckling his cheeks. A braided dress cap effectively concealed his baldness, but there was no obscuring the loss of his eyebrows and lashes.

'This is it,' she replied.

'Last chance.'

Her eyebrows arched theatrically.

'Last chance to run off with me. Ganymede is quite beautiful, for a hive world. It's all right, anyway. I've seen worse.' He gave a broad smile; his gums dark and shrunken. 'And the pension for a colonel's widow isn't unrespectable.'

'It gets a bit less respectable split two ways with your wife, though, doesn't it?' She gave him a stern look. 'Assuming it *is* only two ways.'

Ibran's smile relaxed into something settled. 'Ahh, my wife. It'll be good to see her again, I wonder if *they're* still living in the same hab by the Nanshe catena.'

'I'm sure they are.'

'The regiment promised they'd cover it.'

'I'm sure they did.'

Milein didn't mention that Ibran had only the slimmest of chances of

returning to the Terran system outside of a stasis drawer alongside Luc, Samuel, Eric, Karl and the others. He knew. Forcing a bright smile, she went back to her flipboard. The invalid form was a different colour to the previous. Her stylus touched the dotted line requiring her signature, imagining all of a sudden an ochre-and-grey world she had never seen, a medicae who wouldn't know Ibran Grippe from any other soldier being presented with a similar but differently coloured form. *KIA*. The nib bled ink.

'There.' She blinked quickly, and smiled up at Ibran. 'All official.'

The colonel reached out with red and shaking fingers to take her hand. For a kiss presumably. Such a chivalrous ass. The corpsman slouched over the trolley's push-handle blew out and rolled his eyes.

She extended her hand as the doors to the deck crashed in.

The good-natured badinage between the invalided soldiers that had been following in behind their dead ceased. Everyone shifted in their trolleys to look back. Milein frowned towards the doors, and shrank in sudden, inexplicable dread.

Intep Amar of the Thousand Sons was huge in full armour, as red as freshly spilled blood and just as frightening. His unhelmed face was skeletal, cherry-red, his eyes huge. An angel of death. The white headdress that hung from his iron hood twisted and fluttered as he strode towards Milein and the Arvus. Legion serfs with the Apothecarion helix sewn into their liveries hurried after their master, carting heavy equipment cases.

'What's this?' She surprised herself with her own voice, and flinched.

Ignoring the question, the Librarian pointed to the shuttle. 'I want the bodies removed from that shuttle.' One of the serfs, a supercilious medicae wearing a long red coat, white gloves and unhygienic gold piping handed her a piece of paper. 'All prior repatriation and transfer orders have been rescinded.'

'What?' said Ibran, pushing himself up in his trolley.

'Orders of the Expedition commander.'

'Cicerus would never—'

'You have your orders.'

Milein read the orders to the bottom as Legion serfs charged past and up the ramp to the Arvus, unloading their equipment and piling their trolleys with the dead. Tull would have fought. He would've kicked, screamed, made a fuss, made a scene.

Tull wasn't here.

'The rest of you.' Amar waved vaguely over the Galileans, as if saving his strength. 'Into the shuttle.'

Ibran's face screwed up in pained incomprehension. 'But you said the transfers were rescinded.'

Milein carefully folded the orders, giving her hands something to do other than shake. She tucked the paper into the breast pocket of her coat and looked up at Amar. The Librarian's eyes were bleeding. His skin was red, the shape of his skull visible behind the face She wondered if this was what Magnus looked like and felt sick at the thought.

A little personal adversity, a little taste of actual mortality, and now his golden ideals were smoke. Tull would've been fascinated.

'You believed in the Crusade,' she whispered. 'What happened to you?'

The same Apothecarion serf that had handed her the orders brandished a data-slate. He handed it to Milein. The Librarian tapped the plastek frame, his gauntleted finger as wide as her wrist.

'Sign the orders.'

Tull would have fought.

She hung her head. She didn't want Ibran to see her face. And signed.

From Ferrus' cage, Akurduana could see across the Practice Hall from end to end. Several hundred Iron Hands had congregated.

Silent. Like an ocean in darkness. It was there, but one powerful sense of it was absent.

'You will need your armour,' said Ferrus.

Akurduana almost found himself chuckling.

'I will have it sent for.' Ulan Cicerus stood on the bottom step. The point of his spear was wedged into the right angle of the steps, and he leaned into it. He called for Akurduana's serfs. There was a minor commotion at the periphery of the crowd, but it was impossible to focus on.

Ferrus Manus loomed over him. The primarch was bigger by far even than Gabriel Santar had been in Cataphractii plate when they had duelled on Vesta. His armour had suffered for its confrontation with the Gardinaal. A gouge had been torn from the breast-plate, an unsympathetic infill where the fusion of molten ceramite and liquid sealant had formed a ceramic crust of scar tissue. The gauntlet emblem on his heavy, dog-toothed shoulder guard had been scratched to tracks of white nothing by particle fire. The cloak of mail that hung from his broad shoulders was tom, bent and creased by twisted links, and whispered of its anger with a crinkling of metal. His pale, scarred face was framed by the high back of his riveted gorget, lit coldly by the reflection of its silver trim. Newer injuries furrowed into a scowl as he looked down.

Akurduana was faintly disappointed that Ferrus stood before him with bare fists rather than *Forgebreaker*: to pit his swords against the hammer that his Father had made would have been an honour. He chided himself. What was he thinking?

He was about to face a primarch.

'I have never been able to find a challenge amongst my own sons.' Ferrus remained as still as a mountain as the III Legion serfs clattered into the cage, pushing an arming dummy encased in Akurduana's magnificent battleplate. Piece by piece, they began unbuckling his training leathers and drilling him into his war harness, ignored by the primarch as he spoke 'Even the Legion's ancients can only match me so far. I built this cage myself, for my brothers.'

Akurduana held out his arms while his serfs machined on plates and engaged the seals. 'Then these bars could tell some stories.'

'Fewer than you might think. My brothers are surprisingly reluctant.'

Akurduana's eyebrow arched. The armourers moved to his legs. 'Oh.'

'Fulgrim would joke that he would die with shame, were his sons to see him defeated.' Ferrus snorted. 'Vulkan said that he did not want to hurt me.' And again, looking to his clenching fist. 'Me. I told him that I would make him a finer weapon than that I gifted to Fulgrim if he would try.'

'And?'

'And these bars have few stories to tell.'

'But not none.'

Ferrus' eyes glinted like daggers. His smile did not blunt their edge.

'I am honoured, lord.' The armourers pulled and prodded at Akurduana's seals. Satisfied with their work, the ranking serf approached with his helmet. Akurduana waved him away. He was about to fight a primarch and he intended to savour it.

'I do you no honour.'

'I know.'

'Your birth father fought the Emperor.'

'He did.'

'My brother speaks highly of you.'

'I know.'

'He says you have no equal.'

Akurduana shrugged, but felt a tingle of pride. Not so much in the fact as that it had been spoken by a primarch. 'The Emperor's Children boast many fine swordsmen. Ravasch Cario has the potential to be great. And there is a brilliant young legionary in Second Company called Lucius who may yet reach my standard. If he can tear his face from the mirror.'

'But they are not you.'

'They are not me.'

'I know how that feels.'

Akurduana pivoted around the waist, made some practice punches, testing the armourer's work. The power servos whined as he drew *Timur* and *Athenia*.

The serfs had re-belted his scabbards over his power armour, and the two charnabal sabres emerged from their silks with the most expectant of sighs. An unmodified mortal at the farthest part of the Hall would have felt it.

Ferrus' eyes flickered with self-hatred.

'Begin.'

The anarchy of a warzone had nothing compared to a launch bay in the grip of pre-flight. Aircraft howled, slurped promethium from hoses that lay in tangles along the deck, chewed on ammo belts as they were fed into the huge riveted hoppers of autocannon and heavy bolters. Aircraft never looked more imposing than they did up close on the ground. X Legion serfs crisscrossed, skipping over the knotted tangle of rubber fuel lines and ducking under protruding wings. Servitors pushed trolleys laden with missiles. Helmeted logisticians with spatial sorting matrices appended to their flesh brains waved fluorescent paddles. Magnetic cranes guided by machine intelligence and algorithmic wafer descended from the hex-grid of overhead rails, manoeuvring aircraft into mag-slings in prepared formation.

It was coldly efficient. Perfect.

The open launch-bay doors shimmered with the blue of a coherence field under assault by atmospheric pressure. The void beyond was shifted to the blue end of the spectrum, the stars hidden by the light of it, analogous to a daylit sky on a virginal world, but the bald grey hemisphere of Gardinaal was too huge to be filtered by a little light.

It was not the world's fault that it was ugly, but the sight of it offended Ortan Vertanus just the same. He pitied its people, forced to dwell on such a drab orb. Even Chemos, an exhausted desert of hollowed mountains and drained seas, had possessed bright spots, oases where beauty lingered. But not this place, this homogeneous morass of rockcrete and plasteel and human subordination.

'Where are you taking us?' said Paliolinus. Edoran, Thyro and Sekka crowded in behind him where they would not find themselves in the path of a draught servitor. They were all dressed in their flight armour, looking around in horrified fascination at the almost sorcerous autonomy of the lifting cranes and the hideously - but effectively - altered crew serfs. Paliolinus raised his voice as a machine-driven cart carrying a repair detail growled past. 'We need to prepare for launch.'

'It's a surprise.'

'We lost a pilot. I will not be shown up a second time.'

'We won't.'

Vertanus put his hands on the wing commander's shoulders and turned him

towards a squadron of five broad-nosed, thick-bodied heavy fighters, sitting on their landing gears. Their hull armour was black, trimmed with silver and with white streaks from the harsh overhead lighting, war paint that shifted depending on position and mood. The underslung missile pods were so heavy they seemed to drag the wings into a downward slant and the belly of the craft to the deck. The tailfins spiked upwards from the rear end of the craft, a brutalist, functional sheet of black metal. He sighed, hands on hips as he admired the lead craft. She was a pugilist. Her scars only enhanced her fierceness. Her broken bones only made her tougher. Good looks were for onlookers. What could be more beautiful in battle than taking all your enemy could throw, seeing that in his eyes in the split second before he was annihilated by your guns?

What indeed?

'Then with the losers let it sympathise, for nothing can seem foul to those that win.'

As the Shakespire had said.

'Primaris-Lightnings,' Paliolinus breathed.

'They were damaged prior to Vesta. Their pilots were assigned other roles for the war games and so were left behind with the bulk of the Fifty-second.'

Edoran frowned at the inelegant aircraft, unconvinced.

'They are greatly favoured by the Mechanicum,' said Thyro.

'So are red robes,' Edoran snapped back.

'They are perfect,' Paliolinus announced.

Vertanus dipped his head. 'The Gardinaal no longer has an aeronautica to speak of. There is no need for an interceptor squadron. And—'

'Hush, brother.' Paliolinus emphasised the command with a wave of his hand. 'Do not oil your words with practicalities like an Iron Hand would his wargear. We will fly them for Moses, and carry our wing-brother with us in spirit by riding in the machines he loved best.' Vertanus smiled, but said nothing. Their brothers nodded in understanding. Paliolinus laid a hand on the nose of the lead aircraft. '*Purple Sun*. We will honour him in our way, by doing our utmost to surpass his every achievement.'

The legionaries embraced, a circle of five, a sixth in spirit. When they separated they were five again, hurrying for their fighters.

Ferrus Manus attacked before the command to begin had left his mouth. Given his goliath physique his speed was staggering. A lesser duellist than Akurduana would have been pulverised on the spot, and even he was forced into an admiring gasp as the smouldering metal fist thundered past his eyes. The primarch was holding nothing back, and with a roar he came again.

A thrilling combination of terror and elation filled Akurduana as he jinked between blows, under them, away, fed by a lightness of heart he had not felt with a sword in his hand since the first time he had stood before old Corinth. Before Unification had been won. Ferrus bellowed and swung with his left. Akurduana bent under it and allowed it to clang into the bars. He rolled back. Always back. He did not bother using his swords to parry.

It would have been like blocking a Baneblade.

He ducked and weaved, danced and slid, swords a blur of feint and misdirection. His movements were intuitive, faster than genhanced thought, but compared to the gap between audacious youngster and grizzled Thunder Warrior, that between legionary and primarch was a yawning one.

He grinned. He was going to have to *try*.

With sheer, bludgeoning power Ferrus forced him up against the bars. His swords bit at the vulnerable joints in the primarch's armour. Ferrus ignored them. Stings from a persistent insect. He feinted with *Timur*, drawing the primarch's eyes, then used the length of *Athenia* to stab at the primarch's groin. The master-crafted sabre pierced the heavy mail only to become wedged between a pair of crushed rings. Ferrus gave a snarl and smacked the blade with his wrist. The ancient Grekan blade shattered, rune-inscribed metal shards daggering the floor at Akurduana's feet. The force of the blow splintered his gauntlet, sent hairline fractures running up Akurduana's vambrace and almost pulled his shoulder from its socket. He cried out in glee.

'Why do you laugh?' Ferrus drew back. Even unarmed, he had reach.

Akurduana could only shrug, enfolding *Timur* in a two-handed grip. 'Because.'

Spitting with anger, Ferrus drove his fist at Akurduana's chest. Too big to avoid. Too fast. He cried out in shock as his breast-plate caved in, splitting the palatine aquila into frayed halves, gold leaf fluttering around the hot liquescence of Ferrus' arm. Knuckles ground in. His rib plate cracked. Then shattered. Before he had even registered the pain he was flying, crashing into the bars with force enough to break more bones. The bars themselves were made of firmer stuff. Built by Ferrus' own hand to contain the might of a primarch. They did not bend. Vibrating with a metallic basso profundo, they flung him back into the ring, sprawled on his chest and crying out for the pain of his fractured ribs.

A great weight pushed into his shoulder, elicited a murmur of pain, then closed over it, to haul him up by the golden fretwork.

Ferrus' eyes burned into his, consumed them in his, his expression incandescent as he drew back his arm to deliver a finishing blow.

'I, too, once fought the Emperor. He is a greater being than you could

imagine. How did your mortal father manage it?'

Akurduana could barely see the fist before him. His eye was swollen, his face puffed and bloody. 'He wished to give him every opportunity to yield.' He gave a laugh, coughing it up in gurgles.

Ferrus frowned. 'Tell me why you laugh.'

'Do you not see?'

Ferrus' grip tightened, a splintering of ceramite. Akurduana chuckled, winced, then chuckled again.

'This is what we were born to do. Both of us. To fight. And eventually one day lose. It feels… good.'

Some of the aggression left Ferrus' eyes. 'In one thing at least I was right. Our Legions have much to learn from one another.' He lowered Akurduana to the ground, where the captain proceeded to fold bonelessly over his knees. 'What has now passed was your war, what now commences shall be mine. There will be no feast of celebration, no proclamation of victory. I do not claim worlds. I conquer them. My victories are their own proclamation. I will present my brother Guilliman with ash around a barren star - *that* shall be my proclamation, and the Gardinaal shall forever more be remembered only for the manner in which they fell.' His gaze passed over his warriors, silent before his scorn, for what they had just witnessed was not a contest. It was a lesson.

'I have sought to lead as Fulgrim or Guilliman would have led, but that is not my way. It is not the Medusan way. The Gardinaal have had ample opportunity to yield.'

Grumbles of agreement swept the Hall. Akurduana swayed on the spot, blinking up at the primarch, and it fell to Cicerus to speak out.

'The Emperor desired these worlds intact.'

'The Gardinaal rule over eleven worlds. I will give my father ten.'

'The 413th Expedition will not act in defiance of the Emperor.'

'You are derelict, Chapter Master.'

Cicerus straightened against his wedged spear. 'I serve the Emperor of Terra, the ideals of his Great Crusade, my father and his brothers. In that sequence I will not defy the first of my masters by ordering the destruction of Gardinaal Prime.'

For a long time, Ferrus glared down at the Ultramarine. Then a smile found its way across his face. 'Perhaps if you were with the 413th where you belong then you would have known. You are no longer in command of the Expedition Fleet.'

'You do not have that authority.'

'Guilliman can restore your command once he arrives. I will be done with you by then. Until that happens, your orders come from Iron Father Mor. He

knows what I expect of my warriors.' Cicerus bowed his head, too weary to defend himself any longer. 'Your Ultramarines will have the honour of the first assault.'

Cicerus gave his head a bitter shake. He held up his wounded arm. The sleeve of his toga slid back over crisp white bandages, all the way to the shoulder. Ferrus snorted. He looked expectantly over his sons, and then finally to Akurduana. Slouched at his feet. Like an eel dumped from a net. As if the answer were so blindingly apparent that it was an insult to a primarch to have to voice it 'Fix it, Ultramarine.'

TWELVE

No one had wanted a war. No one had seen war, until now.

For one day Gardinaal Prime turned like meat on a spit under the guns of the Iron Hands fleet. Ship augurs saw the panic spread, ripples of red, the usual inconsistencies of biosignature reads enhanced to precision sharpness by the compound effect of volume. The astropaths felt it, and more viscerally than those on the command deck watching their screens run red. The ritually blinded psykers clawed at the padded walls of their sanctums, their mental defences overwhelmed by hellish visions. The earth split. The sky fell. Billions screamed into the night. But there would be no keeping ahead of this dawn.

The warships of the Iron Tenth did not move. There was no need. The planet obliged, presenting new targets for obliteration as quickly as they could reload and recharge.

Lance strikes demolished hab-towers and militia fortresses without distinction. Macro-ordnance pulverised districts. Cyclonic torpedoes and magma bombs laid waste to hundreds of kilometres of urban conglomeration at a time, fracturing the rockcrete-fused crust, revivifying extinct geologies for one dying surge of volcanism. Cities with hours of grace before the bombardment collapsed into the earth as it turned molten. Manufactories that the 413th Expedition had gone to such lengths to preserve slipped into rivers of lava.

Gardinaal Prime was not the first world to be scoured of a recalcitrant populace in the Emperor's name, but it was the first where this was meted out with such calculated brutality. It was punishment, scaled towards the far end of an infinite series beyond mere collective. No genocide perpetrated by the War Hounds had ever been so severe, or so total.

After one complete revolution it ceased.

What had been a pole-to-pole spread of human habitation, home to hundreds of billions, had become a steaming sphere of magmic red and twisted steel. The creaks and groans of the devastated planetary megalopolis reverberated silently through the void, relayed like the moans of the undead through the spectral augurs and geographs of the Iron Hands in orbit. Only one narrow line of latitude remained unbroken. A complex of linked fortifications, well sited in a zone of tectonic stability within the capitolis and heavily void-shielded, still stood, albeit now surrounded by a moat of lava a hundred metres wide. It could have been hit again until the ground beneath it crumbled. The planet could have been virus-bombed or had its atmosphere purged. It was what Perturabo might have done.

But what was war for if not a demonstration of strength?

Ferrus would look the Gardinaal in the eye as the life left them. He would see the moment they realised - they had always been weak.

And war was what they were getting.

The sky was the red of metal rust. Tremors running the scale from distracting to ground-shaking ran beneath the scuffed boots and dusty, dangerously overheated vehicles of the Imperial Army. The area had come through the bombardment relatively unscathed.

Its buildings were intact, the ground beneath them solid, which as blessings went was as good as they got, but it wasn't going to remain that way for long. Tull Riordan had watched the bombardment crawl from east to west, and while the soldiers under his command managed to grab sleep in shifts, he'd been wide awake to see it crawl back towards them, west to east.

And when he'd seen the fireballs falling from the sky towards their islet of baked rockcrete and groaning plasteel, he'd known the reprieve was over.

After three decades of not exactly risk-averse soldiering, he knew he'd been pushing his luck for some time now, but part of him had never really believed it would end. As if death had had its chance and passed. Most men would've taken the honourable discharge and the meagre pension that came with a bullet in the knee. There were plenty of civilian positions for military-trained medicae. Not him. He was proud of those three decades. Damn proud.

He believed in the Crusade, what it stood for. Always had. He clung to his

belief as if it were the last functioning coolant unit in the galaxy.

The rockcrete spire-block they held as a shelter trembled as a spread of ordnance rocketed overhead and smacked into the ground a few hundred metres away. Plumes of fire and ash rose into the hellish sky to replace the buildings they sent crashing down. Compared to what had gone before, the act of barbarism seemed almost petty. Limping through sprawled divisions of mechanised infantrymen, their visors steamed. Sweating inside death world and hazardous environment gear, Tull walked to the rockcrete barrier that encircled the roof for a better look.

Ibran Grippe held up a pair of magnoculars. He didn't say much anymore. Every earth tremor brought a nervous twitch. His pupils were pinpricks, his mouth never quite shutting properly, as if his jaw was too tense to allow it. A thin trickle of drool ran down his chin and under his collar. He was still in his dress uniform. He was sweating like a grox, but didn't seem to realise it, so thoroughly dosed on combat stimms and painkillers that Grippe probably didn't know his own name.

All for the cause, he told himself, the security and manifest destiny of mankind, but the grand words rang tinnily now.

It was easy to believe when you followed a man like Ulan Cicerus.

Tull pried the magnoculars from Ibran's white-knuckled grip and brought them to his visor. He waited while the auto-focus compensated for heat distortion to zoom into the nearest mound of rubble.

He sighed. He couldn't say anymore if it was relief or resignation. They were drop pods, cobalt blue and gold, their insignia an untarnished white. He panned the view. Dozens of tiny explosions dotted the devastation as the drop pods blew open and hundreds of Ultramarines poured into the last standing remnant of the Gardinaal capitolis. And not just Ultramarines. He saw Thousand Sons, about a dozen of them led by Amar, and even a glittering contingent of Emperor's Children at least a hundred strong.

'Where are the Iron Hands?' he mused aloud.

Everyone was here but them.

Readjusting the magnoculars, he directed their focus through the leaning structures and smoke to the furthest of the drop pods. It had been the first to fall, and had come down nearest to the Gardinaal fortress. An Ultramarine in the gilded mantle of a veteran was raising the banner of the XV Chapter. His brothers were already firing into the ruins, gunning down the slighter figures of the Gardinaal as they fled deeper into the ruins.

Another Space Marine remained by the pod beside his standard bearer. He appeared to be delivering a ferocious address to the legionaries as they charged past, his diatribe complete with violent gestures of his bionic hand

towards the enemy enclave. The startling blue of his plastron had been butchered to make way for the bulky augmetic. Tull didn't recognise him. He was helmed, and to mortal men one armoured Space Marine looked much like another, but he *did* recognise the power sword that the warrior held aloft as he spoke.

'Bloody murder.'

He glanced at Ibran.

He lowered his magnoculars.

'Cicerus…'

The last few phrases of the Chapter Master's address forced through Tull's crackling vox link, and he winced in pain at the sudden volume. He panned the magnoculars towards the fortress. Its walls were heat hazed, its defence towers liquidly coloured and indistinct beneath the installation's voids. They shimmered under a constant rain of debris, discolouring to the occasional *crump* of artillery fire.

With a grunt, he tossed his officer's cane from the roof of the spire-block. He returned Ibran's magnoculars. 'Trooper Grippe.' Ibran looked up. 'Those tablets that Milein gave you, pass them over.' The old colonel obediently did as he was told. Tull unstoppered the vial, coloured tablets falling into his palm. He had no idea what half of them were. 'Thirty years. To end up no better than the Gardinaal.' With a slug of the brackish liquid in his canteen, he knocked the lot back.

Then he gave the order to move out.

He still believed in the Crusade. He had to.

The Iron Hands were the masters of coordinated, combined arms warfare. Only one who had never seen one of their ruthlessly orchestrated set-piece engagements at close quarters could ever dispute it. The commander of any other force would have ordered their artillery to cease bombardment the moment that ground forces came within reach of the walls. But the X Legion artillerymen knew their guns. They knew how far 'minimum safe distance' could be pushed. Earthshaker and Medusa shells hammered into the Gardinaal's wall even as the breacher and assault units of the Ultramarines XV Chapter commenced their attack.

After three hours and sixteen minutes of relentless bombardment, as the Imperial onslaught drove the numerically superior Gardinaal force from their perimeter defences, there was barely a wall left.

The Primaris-Lightnings *Purple Sun* jinked through the rain of heavy ordnance. The shells were too small to be picked up on auspex, the guidance systems even of the Scorpius rockets too basic to alert the aircrafts' systems to

the danger. Ortan Vertanus flew by touch and instinct, every sense exhilarated by the narrowing separation between him and his mortality to the width of a single mistake. Black smoke buffeted the canopy, and he braced, ready for the intake alarms, but the Primaris-Lightning was as rugged a piece of kit as had ever been given wings and an engine, A second later the smoke cleared.

Below him, the purple of Second Company moved through the rubble behind the Ultramarines' assault. They matched their pace to the Imperial Army, The regiments' transports and heavy armour rolled alongside. Vertanus tipped his wing in salute as he flashed across Solomon Demeter's rippling standard.

'I envy them the chance to stretch their legs,' voxed Thyro. The Primaris-Lightning was a thirsty machine, but its tanks were massive. Thyro had started complaining of sores, stiff muscles and claustrophobia after about thirty minutes.

'You say that now, I imagine it looks rather less sunny down there.'

'You take what you make of it, brother.'

Ycitanus chuckled.

'Edoran Sekka, you are veering.' Paliolinus' perfect tones grizzled through the dashboard vox. *'Chapter Master Cicerus has called in an infantry battalion breaking off towards secondary positions. Sixteen degrees starboard. Close formation and fellow me.'*

Confirmations clicked across the frequency.

The wing commander's strike fighter broke to starboard, followed after a brief interval by Edoran and Sekka. Vertanus glanced aside to where Thyro matched course and speed perfectly.

'Ready for a little target practice?'

'Only a little?'

Vertanus opened up the throttle. His engines roared as they flooded the machine with power, forward thrust coming up against the angle of his ailerons to push down his starboard wing and into a hard turn. He howled like a maniac as he descended, G-force widening his grin into a rictus. Nearer to the ground the smoke thinned. Rockcrete rushed towards him. Bodies in dark grey body armour scattered. Snap shots pattered his armour. By the primarch, Moses had been right. The Primaris-Lightning was a beast.

He pulled back on the centre stick, running parallel to the ground at three times the speed of sound, then opened fire. Lascannons and multilasers ripped through the mass of soldiers as they tried to flee, the survivors flattened by his sonic boom as he thundered through. He broke off, dumping speed, looping back over the soldiers he had not yet killed.

He tried not to think of the enemy as men. He reached for the flick switch to

open his bomb pods. He almost hesitated.

A rain of phosphex cluster-bombed the area.

'Ortan, status,' voxed Paliolinus.

Vertanus' strike fighter wobbled as it climbed, the thermal eddies of a thousand incinerated human beings upsetting his wings. It was as if he were running over their bodies in a truck. Suddenly, all sense of pleasure departed and in its absence left him sickened.

'A perfect run, brother,' he said, pointedly refusing to look back. 'The primarch will be overjoyed.'

The Firebrands of Legio Atarus were a force of ill repute. A product of the brief conflict between the Phateon Forgeworld and Mars, the imperious war machines were intemperate, considered by the Collegia Titanica to be unlucky, and aggressively predisposed against any stratagem that did not demand wholesale devastation and a long leash. Ulan Cicerus had called on their firepower only once, a last desperate throw of the dice as the Chapter Master's first attempt at pacifying the Gardinaal had turned sour. In Ferrus Manus and Iron Lord Autek Mor they had commanders more suited to their way of war.

With a wrathful shout blaring through its war-horn, the Reaver Titan *Bellum Sacrum* led the snarling remnants of the demi-legio to the slaughter.

It took a phenomenal body of men to slow down the Legiones Astartes. Give the Gardinaal their due, they were capable of fielding a phenomenal body of men. Cicerus had been right. The Gardinaal war machine would have been an incalculable asset to the Great Crusade. Pity, then, that it had become Amadeus DuCaine's job to destroy it.

He roared as he laid into the Gardinaal with axe and bolter. His helm augmitters amplified the war cry to a stunning volume, but even he barely heard it.

Men screamed, weapons roared, armour whirred and clanged and fizzled sparks, power fields spasmed. Flash grenades popped like strings of firecrackers. *Bellum Sacrum* sounded her war-horn, a long sonorous blast that brought a severely compromised gun tower crashing down in a cascade of rubble and sharply muted screams. Aircraft nipped through the grey plume. A Fire Raptor, silver edge-trims flickering with the ferocity of the firelight below, swooped in, strafing the packed ranks of light infantry with twin streams of shot. Dozens fell in a single pass. DuCaine scarcely noticed.

He shouldered in, crushed men against other men, crushed bones to jelly underfoot, resorting to physically dragging a soldier from the packed melee to make space for him to push into.

The Gardinaal's visor was cracked and flecked with spittle. His expression was a mask of abhorrence twisted by a cocktail of conditioning and drugs. He beat wildly at DuCaine's armour with bayonet and toe caps, screaming defiance even as DuCaine hurled him aside.

Across the slender bulge of the Imperial assault the story was the same.

DuCaine's second wave had bunched in with the vanguard warriors of the III, XIII and XV Legions, compressed onto a narrower and narrower front by the great swell of bodies in clacking grey plate. Sheer volume held the might of the Legions at bay and was even beginning to drive the Imperial's flank into a pinch point where the last of the Army's reserves held the breach in the outer wall. Crab-like superheavy walkers bristling with Titan-busting firepower duelled with the Legio Atarus. Tank traps, ditches and rough barricades forced the Legion's tanks into the role of spectators. The ground behind the Ultramarines' advance was littered with the bent remains of Sentinel scout walkers that had attempted to keep pace with the legionaries only to fall to the withering enfilade from the gun towers of the inner wards. Only a handful of Dreadnoughts had made it to the front, towering bulwarks of plasteel and ceramite from which men and bits of men, torn apart, bullet-riddled and aflame, would periodically be thrown into the air.

Between sprays of blood and the progressive splintering of his face shield, he marked unit types and formations he had not seen so far.

Brutish cybernetica, their dull red armour inscribed with proto-Gothic runic script. Trike vehicles mounting devastating anti-armour weapons. Soldiers with hieroglyphic electoos on their bald heads surrounded by muttering dwarf familiars and hypnotic auras.

He turned his head towards a barely audible *crack*, just in time to be caught by the blood spraying from Rab Tannen's faceplate.

He roared, smearing the blood from his lenses with the scrap of banner he had wound about his forearm. DuCaine's armour was scarred, pitted, scratched, degraded by relentless punishment to the point that even a stray baton round to the head would be potentially deadly. Hardly the way he would want to be found. Turning his grief into a howl of fury, he grabbed a Gardinaal soldier by the face, crushed his skull with the barest application of force and drove his twitching corpse like a riot shield into the press.

'Live forever in glory! For the primarch!' His warriors rallied to him, answering his call with cries of their own. 'I'd say the storm is damn well raised, lad.' DuCaine turned to Caphen, but Caphen wasn't there. He was back with Second Company, a casualty of Ferrus' decree that Legion boundaries be restored prior to the final assault. DuCaine missed him.

Now that he was gone.

With the last stalwarts of the Gardinaal fully engaged by the might of four Legions and the god-machines of the Legio Atarus, Ferrus Manus delivered one final demonstration of contempt. It was overkill of the highest order, but the compliance of Gardinaal Prime had ceased to be a military operation and had become an object political lesson. Not for the Gardinaal, of course. Their last chance to draw anything from their first reunion with the Imperium of Man had expired with the arrival of Ferrus Manus.

It was for everyone else.

At his voxed command one bright speck in the firmament of Gardinaal swelled, bleaching the sky of its neighbours with the light of a supernova. It was *Fist of Iron*, shining over Gardinaal Prime like a newly kindled sun in the split second before the sky above the fortress exploded into the indigos and violets of void shield discharge and aggressively blue-shafted lance beams. The voids held firm, as Ferrus had known they would, but the air within their bubble yielded. With an apocalyptic crack of thunder, a blast of overpressure turned rockcrete to explosive blooms of powder and flattened anything lighter than a power-armoured Space Marine.

Dominated by light infantry, the Gardinaal were decimated.

The effect on the Imperial Army was comparable.

The Primarch of the Iron Tenth was not given to introspection or self-doubt. The endless cycles of codification and re-analysis that must have occupied Guilliman's every moment held no interest for him. Neither did he possess the patience for the moral quandaries that Vulkan or Corax or even Fulgrim indulged prior to a campaign to restore a reluctant diaspora to the Terran fold.

There was only one way to wage war, and that was to do it totally, with every tool and weapon at his disposal employed to their absolute.

His way.

The violet aurorae began to burn off, a spasming flicker of void light that came in sympathy to the dusty rattle and sputter of small arms in the killing ground below. Ferrus Manus boarded his Land Raider. It was an Achilles-Alpha variant. Its hull armour was wound with wyrms and wyverns, its sponson mounts bearing the silver fist of the Iron Hands. The primarch's personal standard tore over the belching fumes of the vehicle's exhausts. A skirt of heavy iron scales hung over its lower section of track. It was a thing of powerful beauty, but it was still, first and foremost, a tank.

He called it *Godhammer*.

The Land Raider slammed into a barrier of dead flesh. Its tracks squealed, chewing into the corpses of Gardinaal soldiers and spitting out gore and gristle, slewing side to side and coating its skirts with crimson paste. But solid

matter could be compressed only so far, and even the ferromantic vigour of *Godhammer* could only drive it so hard.

The forward assault ramp slapped down. Ferrus Manus stamped hard until the bodies blocking its proper deployment had been flattened sufficiently for him to emerge.

He filled his enormous lungs. Fyceline. Promethium. Ozone. Death on an apocalyptic scale. He gave a grunt of satisfaction as his honour guard finally managed to force their own way free of the Land Raider to join him. Five Terminators of the First Order; a Land Raider could accommodate no more of the warriors alongside a primarch. Harik Morn led them. His armour still carried the scars of the explosion, but the injury to his flesh was nothing that a genhanced physique and the demand for immediate retribution could not overcome. Veneratii Urien would fight on from a body of iron, but this day had come too soon for him.

'Leave nothing,' said Ferrus.

'With pleasure,' Morn answered coldly.

More transports smacked wetly into the killing field as the primarch pushed ahead. Rhinos and Land Raiders drove into the meat wall. Massive Spartans ploughed further, disgorging scores of warriors at a time. The Cataphractii of Clan Avernii waded into the dead to tear into stranded war machines. The grimly armoured Destroyers of Clan Vurgaan blasted a path with volkite and phosphex. The two clans' bitter rivalry and recent history were shackled by their common fury over the fate of Veneratii Urien and by the driving spear-tip of their primarch.

And the Gardinaal could not stand before it.

The ancient Lords of the Gardinaal, massive in their mortuary war-plate, sought to marshal the retreat, but Ferrus Manus bestrode their world like a colossus.

Every blow of his hammer left crab walkers crippled and war machines haemorrhaging smoke from their ruin. Bullets ricocheted harmlessly off his armour. Beams bent and blades turned against his flesh. Men died unnamed and uncounted. He was war. War at its most brutal. No voice cheered him, for few welcomed the coming of war, but his towering presence drew vigour from the spent muscles of his allies and tore down the fog of evolutionary selection and drugs that had blinded the Gardinaal to fear. Ferrus lifted his hammer aloft and roared for retribution as DuCaine, Cicerus and Demeter all discovered a last reserve of strength to see his will done.

This world would be uninhabitable for centuries, but he was not mankind's liberator.

He was their conqueror.

First Palatine. First Blade of the Two Hundred. Fulgrim's Firstborn. There was no warrior fraternity to which he was member in which Akurduana's name was not counted first. Another might have watched the passage of the likes of Eidolon and Vespassian to a Lord Commander's laurels from his languishment as a mere captain of Second Company and taken it as an insult to an extraordinary talent. He knew what his talents were, and yes, they were extraordinary, but he knew his flaws just as keenly. Fulgrim, infinite in his affection for his children, had let it be known that no warrior called to fight with the Palatine Blades as often as Akurduana could be burdened with high command. The truth was that he was half the leader that Solomon Demeter already was. A totem, perhaps. An inspiration, maybe. Humble, never, until a primarch had force-fed him an overdue share.

He drew *Timur* from the body of the final guard and allowed the mortal to sink quietly to the ground amongst his dozen or so comrades.

The wind at the tower's roof was cinder-hot and furious, rising from the lava sea and the firefight below. It tugged at his warrior braid as he checked over his shoulder. Humming with a tunelessness that would have enraged him not so long ago, he knelt to set the charges.

There was no pain. The drugs in Tull's system had seen to that. The ground beneath him was lumpy, but not at all uncomfortable. The fact that it was the body armour of friends and comrades registered somewhere, but couldn't lodge; his mind was smooth, and seemed to be ballooning by the moment.

He stared up at the fortified control tower that the Gardinaal had given their last to hold, but it couldn't hold his attention. He no longer cared.

He saw Cicerus. Flames danced around the Ultramarine's ankles as he was dragged under by a mob of ogreish gene-breds. He saw Amar. Arcs of psychic energy leapt from his flaming sword and through the tight-packed Gardinaal soldiers. They burned by the hundred. A single bullet to his unhelmed head put him down. He saw Demeter shouting. The III Legion warrior was screaming, exhorting, even now. He could see DuCaine too. The veteran drove the Iron Hands into the Gardinaal's guns like a 'dozer blade.

It was time for mortals to step aside. It was time for the superhumans to wage war.

Tanks and fire and ungodly angels spun away from him as his vision swam, a blur of shape and colour streaked with black. The colour of Medusa. The colour of death. After what felt like a few seconds, but was clearly longer, his vision cleared. He found himself, by accident or design, looking directly at Ferrus Manus.

The primarch was wrath made manifest, an avatar of the Emperor's desire

for conquest, clad in sutured iron.

A crab-like superheavy walker crunched through the Space Marines' fire. Its bulk hung over the primarch. Like a planet above its moon. It raised a chipped and bolter-ravaged limb, but one of Ferrus' Terminator guard managed to heave the embattled primarch aside before the limb crashed down. Ferrus roared his outrage. He grabbed the limb, a man's width of armoured hydraulics, and crushed it in his hand. The walker struggled for a moment in Ferrus' grip, a scene from Grekan myth as man drew in arthropoidal Titan and broke it under his hammer.

Tull felt his spirit settle, finally giving up on something that had been denying it peace.

Astartes psychology had fascinated him for years. Their existence was so removed from that of mortal men: their bodies had been strengthened, their lifespans lengthened, their emotions engineered to rob them of fear and doubt and to reshape them to their primarch's template. They had been made for war and nothing else, their psychologies shaped by the scope of the changes wrought upon them. And finally Tull felt he understood. The Space Marines were as different from him as either would be from an ork or an eldar. They were nothing alike. And the primarchs were an order of magnitude more distant again.

Ferrus Manus was headstrong, prideful, uncompromising, inhumane, as flawed as any human being, but taken to such superhuman extremes that it took a dying man to see them as flaws. With that realisation came one more. His last.

He was as incomprehensible to Ferrus as Ferrus was to him.

It wasn't a reassuring thought, but he still believed.

He had to.

And this time, his eyes didn't reopen.

Gardinaal Prime's orbital bands were clogged with debris. Corroded junk tech left over from five thousand years of exploitation, rubble from the mineral extraction from its moons. The field had oriented over the millennia into a nascent ring system, aligned to the planet's magnetic field and rotation, the entire region of supra-orbital debris saturated with radiation. The fleet augurs of the 52nd and the 413th, and of the *Aspect Voyager*, the Rogue Trader vessel that had rediscovered the Gardinaal system for the Imperium in 858.M30, had all detected the emissions, extrapolated the decay rate and come to the same conclusion: that the radiation was the trace residual from the atomic devices used to crack open the planet's exhausted satellites about sixteen hundred years before.

They were all half right.

In response to the unanimous code approvals of the last Lords of the Gardinaal, a ring of low-orbital platforms came sluggishly to life. Radiation signatures spiked as shielding was lowered, launch doors opened, and firing mechanisms that had lain dormant in space for about sixteen hundred years warmed through. Attitude impellers frothed, the weapons platforms each manoeuvring towards a single target.

An insular imperium of eleven worlds, the Lords of the Gardinaal had never given serious credence to a threat from without.

Their final solution had been devised accordingly.

The approach to the command tower was a tangled maze of razor wire, hung with debris and the dead of the Gardinaal and Legiones Astartes alike. Not in equal measure, far from it, for they were not equal, but near enough to stoke Perms' distemper.

The Gardinaal's mortuary walkers carved up the killing ground between them, essentially impervious to anything more delicate than a Titan or a primarch. Infantry and automated turrets compounded their positional advantage with weight of fire. A squad of Thousand Sons managed to drive a single walker off with repeated lashes of psychic power. An Ultramarine Dreadnought grappled another, his chassis creaking as the mortuary engine's strength tore it slowly in half and all around him his brothers fell.

Ferrus heard a scratch, like nails drawn across ceramite, coming from his gorget, he ignored it, looking up as, in a splintering of iron gravel, the mighty Warhound *Canis Luna* swivelled its arm batteries towards the command tower and unleashed. The barrage of its mega bolters bruised the structure's shields, but nothing more.

It was the heart of the Gardinaal's defiance and Ferrus Manus wanted it rubble.

He made to establish a vox link to the Firebrands' princeps, only being forced to attend to the insistent scratch from the vox pearl under his gorget. He activated it with a grunt.

'My lord.' The voice was Shipmaster Laeric's, a note of anxiety to it that Ferrus had never associated with the *Fist of Iron's* mortal caretaker. The sounds of panicked command operations piggybacked the line. *'We're picking up a number of orbital signatures targeting your co-ordinates.'*

'Destroy them.'

Ferrus lowered his hammer and allowed his Terminator guard to push ahead. Above them *Canis Luna* hungrily reloaded, gorging on ammo belts as though they were raw meat and spattering the Iron Hands with spent casings.

'Escorts are moving to intercept, lord. But we can't acquire accurate solutions in the radiation field, and we can't manoeuvre capital ships into the rings. I've ordered fighters recalled, but there's no time to refuel or rearm, and… my lord, I think—'

'How many weapons?'

Silence for a moment. *'It's going to make what hit the 413th look like a warning shot.'*

With the fastidiousness and speed of a primarch, Ferrus took stock.

Bolts and beamers made a deadly crisscross of the air. The Legiones Astartes drove into it yet, spearheaded by the might of the X Legion, every metre gained drawing more doggedness and resolve from the taking than the last. It was brutally hot. The older-Mark power armours were beginning to whine and even seize with the radiation. The molecular disruption fields of power weapons sizzled constantly.

The command tower was the heart of the Gardinaal's defiance That much was plain. But why? Was it crucial to the operation of their orbital weapons, or did the Gardinaal expect its reinforced structure and shielding to withstand the coming holocaust? Or was there no rationale; was this naught but a dying attempt to make this a pyrrhic triumph for the Imperium of Man, to strike at a distant Emperor by destroying the one thing he loved and could not replace - one of his sons?

His admiration for the Gardinaal grew.

'They raised the storm.'

'Lord?'

'Move *Fist of Iron* into the rings. Ram her into every last rock if that is what it takes.'

'Aye, lord.'

He cut the link.

'No relent!' Ferrus bellowed, raising *Forgebreaker* high. 'Fight to your last drop of strength or die here today. Wait for no man who cannot continue!' Taking his hammer two-handed and preparing to charge, he heard his vox scratch again. 'What?'

'Above you, my lord primarch.'

Ferrus growled in surprise, but true to his own command barrelled into the Gardinaal as he did so. His raw power broke them, equivalent to being rammed by a Land Raider. 'Akurduana? Where have you been?'

'Look up.'

A multilaser mounted on an automated sentry pod a few metres along the defence line opened up on him. His armour soaked up the hail of las, and *Forgebreaker* crushed the multi-barrelled weapon into its tripod. Then Ferrus

looked up.

The captain of Second Company flickered, the purple flame of a beacon, darting around the base of the dish array at the summit of the command tower without ever really moving at all. Even injured, his swords were smoke, and the soldiers of the Gardinaal that charged up onto the roof to end him fell away like ash. 'How did you get up there?'

'When you are but one of two hundred, you learn that one man can go places a thousand cannot.' Grunts and the clang of steel momentarily occupied the line.'The Third Legion takes its share of losses, but by the grace of the Emperor we take fewer.'

'Can you disable that dish?'

'It is in hand,' Akurduana laughed. *'Consider this my oath upheld.'*

'You will make the Emperor a mighty regent one day. Let us hope he never requires one.'

'Akurduana. What are you—?'

The frequency broke from the captain's end. Ferrus wasted several furious seconds attempting to force its reinstatement, before abandoning the effort.

It had become suddenly, staggeringly futile.

A white flash ignited the dish array's rockcrete base. It was barely noticeable, little more than a spark, but it set off a shockwave that rippled through the dish, disintegrating metal and rockcrete as it went. A mushrooming plume of fire succeeded the initial wave, cremating every last particle that had, through the fractions of a second between the instigating flash and this, still resembled a complete dish. Not anymore. The fireball caught the front of the shockwave and rebounded back.

The upper hundred metres of the tower exploded, as if an Elemental had just been born within.

The suddenness and scale of the eruption brought a brief, stunned lull to the fighting. Exhausted legionaries looked up, their visors darkening so as to maintain visual acuity while staring into the exuberant blaze. Ferrus felt its burn in his metallic eyes. The Gardinaal looked up too.

'My lord, we've lost the weapons signatures. I think that—'

Ferrus cut off the shipmaster with a snarl.

It began with one.

An infantryman that had been facing off against DuCaine's Clan Sorrgol veterans threw his rifle at the Lord Commander's feet. His unit followed, then the company, the battalion. By the time the clatter of falling rifles had reached the guns of the sentry posts and the crew of the battered Gardinaal war machines it was a wave that could not be resisted. Surrounded by it, finally breaking under it, the lords of the Gardinaal lowered their weapons systems.

Their walker suits shrank with a hiss of fluid hydraulics. Their shields sputtered out.

Covering his eyes with his hand, Ferrus dug fingers into his temples and growled.

He could feel the migraine returning, the need to answer his pain received with pain given. But there was an old Terran saying - about cutting off one's nose to spite one's face.

He let the anger rasp through his lips as he gave the final order, the order that would forever more become synonymous with the compliance of the Gardinaal.

'It is done.'

THIRTEEN

The X Legion stood attentive in centuries. Blocs of a hundred, ten by ten, every warrior clad in his finest. Their armour had been lapped and polished until it sparkled like glass. Laurels had been affixed. Silver gleamed. Bolters were clenched to chests in fists of flawless black or of cool, oiled steel, and shone under the luminous gems of the Practice Hall as though each legionary bore a token of precious silver. Every tenth century, warriors of the III and XIII Legions provided a subdued injection of colour. In all, three hundred centuries of Legiones Astartes stood in fullest glory, and yet if Ferrus Manus were to close his eyes there would be nothing but the consonant hum of thirty thousand suits of power armour to betray them. They were as silent as the dead.

'I am imperfect,' he murmured, voice too low for the ears of any but a primarch to hear.

'What is this, brother?' Fulgrim had come draped in sombre finery, the purple of his magnificent ceremonial plate muted with matt lacquers and sanative oils. 'It is unlike you to be maudlin.'

Ferrus grunted as the great doors at the distant end of the Hall were hauled aside with minimal fanfare. A procession of grim armoured figures marched through, their heads bared as a final mark of respect. Iron Hands predominated, but there were Emperor's Children, Ultramarines and even one of the surviving Thousand Sons amongst their number. They bore a bier

between them. On it lay three leaden caskets.

Fulgrim followed his gaze.

'Do you believe that even the First Expedition Fleet never suffers a casualty?'

Ferrus said nothing. With eyes of restless silver he watched as the caskets passed the observant centuries towards the dais that had been erected for the primarchs to commemorate their children's sacrifice.

'The Gardinaal surrendered, did they not?' Fulgrim whispered, his eyes, sensitive and benevolent, never once leaving the procession's sober path. 'En masse. As soon as the fate of their capital world spread. I would argue that you saved lives.'

'I was not thinking of saving lives.'

'I know, brother.'

At the end of its procession the bier was set down before the primarchs. Warriors emerged from the most honoured centuries to drape the three caskets with Legion banners. Amadeus DuCaine stood stiffly to attention among the litter bearers, his armour glassy black and perfect, shaking with a stubborn defiance of emotion.

'What is the system to be called?' Fulgrim went on, softly. 'Fifty-two-nine?'

'You and Guilliman may fight over it. I don't care what becomes of the worlds once I am done.'

'Our dear brother looks preoccupied.' Fulgrim looked up. 'You just know he is composing an entire supplementary codicil on this campaign in his head right now.'

Ferrus glanced across the dais.

The primarch of the XIII Legion had arrived with the full might of the 12th Expedition exactly one day after the purge of Gardinaal Prime. He had expressed relief at first, emerging from the warp with weapons charged only to find a compliant system. That had turned quickly into anger as he had learned more. And then Roboute Guilliman had heard of Ulan Cicerus' treatment at Ferrus' hands and his ultimate fate. His wrath had been such that Ferrus had not been certain he would attend. But attend he had, clad like a battle king in war-plate of the proudest royal blue bedecked with gold relief, white cloak and a mighty Ultima stamped into his shoulder. He was angry, yet articulate, wrathful, yet noble - he was all that Ferrus Manus had striven to be.

'He admires you, you know,' said Fulgrim, with the near-telepathy that only the closest of brothers could share. 'Greatly. I've heard him say that he counts you and Dorn as the greatest among us.'

Ferrus snorted and looked away. 'It is not reciprocated.'

Almost overlooked by the primarchs, DuCaine began to speak. His voice broken by grief, he spoke of the Unification of the Central Afrik, and the first

time he had crossed paths, and swords, with a brilliant young captain by the name of Akurduana.

Ferrus already knew the tale.

'I thought that I could lead the Legions as well I lead my own. It turns out I haven't the patience for it.'

Fulgrim emitted a whisper of muffled laughter. Ferrus glared. 'You are not imperfect, brother, you are…' His eyes turned upwards as if seeking the word amongst the stars beyond the great arched windows of the Hall.

'Say 'special' and I will hit you right here in front of everyone.'

Fulgrim's smile was dazzling, and drew all sting from his brother's words. Such was his power. There were few beings in this galaxy that would dare lay a hand on Ferrus Manus, and Fulgrim was one of them. To any who saw, it would have appeared to be nothing more than one brother offering consolation to another. There would be many, after today, who would speak of how the grim and terrible Gorgon had been moved to sorrow by the passing of Ulan Cicerus, Intep Amar and Akurduana.

Such was Fulgrim's power.

His elegy concluded, DuCaine wiped an errant tear from his cheek and withdrew from the row of caskets. Representatives of the Ultramarines and the Thousand Sons stepped forward to speak to the valour of their fallen brothers.

'It was a great honour you bestowed,' said Ferrus, 'allowing DuCaine to speak for Akurduana.'

'We are all brothers here,' said Fulgrim. 'We all come from the same place.'

Ferrus nodded.

'I have given Solomon Demeter the captaincy of Second Company.'

'Santar was impressed by him.'

'The character of the Company will inevitably change.' Fulgrim sighed. 'Akurduana was something… unique.'

'They will rebuild,' said Ferrus, his voice becoming firm. 'Stronger than they were before.'

From front to rear, the centuries came forward to salute the caskets, the litter bearers, the primarchs, before departing the Hall.

Ferrus turned fully to Fulgrim as they came, looking into the depthless purple of his eyes. 'You have heard the rumour, I assume. That the Emperor means to retire from his Crusade as soon as he is reunited with the last of his missing sons.'

'He spoke nothing of it, if that is what you are asking.'

Ferrus grunted, crossing his arms and turning his attention to the bier. 'I want you to know that it will not be me, and that whomever is chosen shall have

my backing regardless.'

'Regardless?'

'You know what I mean.' Ferrus glanced at his brother sideways, his eyes remaining motionless, inscrutable as silver pools. 'Is there anything that you can tell me of our father?'

Fulgrim shrugged. 'He brought us to a world called Molech. We conquered it. Nothing more of note beyond that, as I recall. It was actually rather routine.' Ferrus doubted that. The coming together of four full Legions was either the consequence of great events or the cause. He could attest to that, and was about to, but then Fulgrim brightened, even as his expression remained the zenith of the bereaved father. 'I did meet our new brother.'

'What do you make of him?'

'He calls himself the Khan, though I'm not entirely convinced he understands what the word means. He's very… feral.' The primarch chuckled. 'I think you will like him.'

'This is why I appreciate your company, brother,' Ferrus whispered in Fulgrim's ear, eyeing the statuesque form of Roboute Guilliman at the far side of the dais. 'You only ever see the better part of me.'

Moses Trurakk pushed himself up, feeling the surgical slab beneath his hands. Raw nerve endings in his shoulders reported the pressure his weight applied to the surface, its asperity and temperature, even the ratio of iron to other minerals in the steel. But he felt nothing. With a purr of expertly integrated augmetics he raised both hands from the slab. He looked at them. Indicator lights blinked back. Minute gearing systems whirred as he rotated the wrists, tested the power of their grip. He smiled.

'Apothecary Glassius does good work.'

Moses squinted into the dimly lit apothecarion, a silvery silhouette breaking over the horrifically scarred visage of Gabriel Santar.

The First Captain had never been a picture, but now he looked like something that had been knocked out of an asteroid field. His left arm had been replaced entirely with a bionic, as had both legs. A large part of his left side and lower torso had been plated in chrome. A dark surgical robe hung off him, open on both sides, and concealing approximately nothing of his restructured physique. There was a time when the presence of a warrior as illustrious as Santar would have left Moses groping for words, but not now. The barriers of rank that separated them, if they had ever been real at all, no longer seemed relevant.

'He does,' he answered simply.

Moses looked down the length of his body. He could not feel his feet. His

legs were covered by a blanket, but he did not need it removed to know what he would see underneath. He remembered the crash, even if the events leading to his return were more vague. He looked around, his augmetic eye piercing the gloom. A Legion apothecarion was unlike his mortal counterpart. The medical interventions that were capable of superseding a legionary's own ability to heal himself were few and superficially crude. The air smelled of blood, oil and concentrated alcohol. The light blinked off the dulled edges of saws, blunted on ceramite and hard Astartes bone, and vices. Amongst the apparatus of disassembly and repair, recumbent forms lay on every slab. Some lacked limbs. Others returned the muted lighting with sharp metallic glints of their own.

It must have been quite the slaughter - for a pilot of the Vurgaan Clan to be tended by the Chief Apothecary of Clan Sorrgol.

'Will they still be able to fly?' asked Santar, referring to the metal hands.

'They will fly better.' Moses clenched his new hands and drew them to him, searching for something profound but as yet unsaid. He drew back the blanket that had been placed over him, exposing the hard lines and unfeeling metal of two fully augmetic legs.

And it came to him. The truth of it. He looked up, and in that moment saw that his brother understood it too.

'The flesh is weak.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Guymer wrote the Primarchs novel *Ferrus Manus: Gorgon of Medusa*, and for Warhammer 40,000 *The Eye of Medusa* and the two The Beast Arises novels *Echoes of the Long War* and *The Last Son of Dorn*. For Warhammer Age of Sigmar he wrote the audio dramas *The Beasts of Cartha*, *Fist of Gork*, *Fist of Mork*, *Great Red* and *Only the Faithful*. He is also the author of the Gotrek & Felix novels *Slayer*, *Kinslayer* and *City of the Damned*. He is a freelance writer and occasional scientist based in the East Riding, and was a finalist in the 2014 David Gemmell Legend Awards for his novel *Headtaker*.

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* 9. If any part of this license is illegal, or becomes illegal as a result of any change in the law, then that part shall be deleted, and replaced with wording that is as close to the original meaning as possible without being illegal.

* 10. Any failure by Black Library to exercise its rights under this license for whatever reason shall not be in any way deemed to be a waiver of its rights, and in particular, Black Library reserves the right at all times to terminate this license in the event that you breach clause 2 or clause 3.